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ABSTRACT

This anthology, of more than 225 short poems by Polish authors, was created to be used in world literature classes in a high school with many first-generation Polish students. The following poets are represented in the anthology: Jan Kochanowski; Franciszek Dionizy Kniaznin; Elzbieta Druzbacka; Antoni Malczewski; Adam Mickiewicz; Juliusz Slowacki; Cyprian Norwid; Wladyslaw Syrokomla; Maria Konopnicka; Jan Kasprowicz; Antoni Lange; Leopold Staff; Boleslaw Lesmian; Julian Tuwim; Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz; Maria Pawlikowska; Kazimiera Illakowicz; Antoni Slonimski; Jan Lechon; Konstanty Ildefons Galczynski; Kazimierz Wierzynski; Aleksander Wat; Mieczyslaw Jastrun; Tymoteusz Karpowicz; Zbigniew Herbert; Bogdan Czaykowski; Stanislaw Baranczak; Anna Swirszczynska; Jerzy Ficowski; Janos Pilinsky; Adam Wazyk; Jan Twardowski; Anna Kamienska; Artur Miedzyrzecki; Wiktor Woroszlyski; Urszula Koziol; Ernest Bryll; Leszek A. Moczulski; Julian Kornhauser; Bronislaw Maj; Adam Zagajewski; Ferdous Shahbaz-Adel; Tadeusz Rozewicz; Ewa Lipska; Aleksander Jurewicz; Jan Polkowski; Ryszard Grzyb; Zbigniew Machej; Krzysztof Koehler; Jacek Podsiadlo; Marzena Broda; Czeslaw Milosz; and Wislawa Szymborska. (BT)

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22 October 1998

Mr. Andrzej Dakowski, Executive Director
U.S. - Polish Fulbright Commission
ul. Nowy Świat 4, Room 113
00-497 Warszawa
POLAND

Dear Andrzej:

Enclosed you will find my completed project for the 1998 Fulbright Seminar in Hungary and Poland. I am sorry it has taken so long to get this to you, but the project became much bigger than I had originally expected.

I began my Fulbright project with the idea of doing extensive reading of Polish and Hungarian poetry and thereby finding poetry appropriate for use in my World Literature classroom. While in Poland and Hungary I purchased numerous books of poetry in both nations. In addition I acquired here in the States a number of books relating to the project. Since our school has a very large number of first generation Polish students, I decided to begin by reading Polish poetry. The task kept enlarging and I read about fifteen books of poetry and accumulated almost two hundred pages of poetry into an anthology. The immensity of the endeavor precluded my continuing into Hungarian poetry as I had originally planned. I decided to keep this task until later when I could find time.

I will use the anthology as a resource from which I can draw from for my World Literature and Sophomore English classes. I am continuing my work on Polish poetry as I am currently reading Czesław Miłosz book *The History of Polish Literature* and waiting on my desk is Manfred Kridl's *A Survey of Polish Literature and Culture*. From there I expect to write a journal article on Polish poetry.

I am grateful for the experience of being a participant and for the wonderful experience that the Fulbright Commissions of the host countries planned for me.

Sincerely,

Thomas A. Smith
Fulbright Seminar Participant 1998

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Anonymous

Lament of Our Lady under the Cross

Anonymous

(c. 1450)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960]

Hear me, my dears, this bleeding head
I want to lament before you turn;
listen to this affliction that
befell me on Good Friday.

Pity me, all of you, old and young,
The feast of blood will be my song.
I had a single son,
it is for him I weep.

A poor woman, I was rudely confused
when I saw my birthright in bitter blood.
Dreadful the moment and bloody the hour
when I saw the infidel Jew
beat and torment my beloved son.

Oh, son, sweet and singled-out,
share your pain with your mother.
I carried you near my heart, dear son.
I served you faithfully.
Speak to your mother. Console my great grief
now that you leave me and all my hopes.

Small boy, if you were only lower
I could give you a little help.
Your head hangs crooked: I would support it,
your dear blood flows; I would wipe it off.
And now you ask for a drink and a drink I would give you,
but I cannot reach your holy body.

Oh, angel Gabriel
where is that range of joy
you promised me would never change?
You said: "Virgin, you are filled with love,"
but now I am full of a great grief.
My body has rowed inside me and my bones moulder.

Oh, all you wistful mothers, implore God

that such a sight may never visit your children,
not this which I, a poor woman, now witness,
not this which happens to my dearest son,
who suffers pain and yet is guiltless.

Jan Kochanowski

Song
by Jan Kochanowski
(1530-1584)
[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

What do you want of us, great God, who gives
Limitless favour to each thing that lives?
The Church will not contain you, you, entire
In every inch of water, land and fire.

Riches is useless since to you alone
Belongs each jewel that man thinks his own.
A grateful heart, great God, is all that can
Be offered to you by poor things like man.

You built the sky, embroidered galaxies
And sketched foundations so that from them rise
Perimeters too huge for men to trace:
Earth's nakedness you coveted with green grace.

Great God of all the world, the sea obeys
Your vast commands and keeps to its set ways.
The rivers richen. Day knows when to dawn.
Night and the twilight linger and are gone.

The Spring brings garlands and the Summer wears
A crown of wheat like girls who dance at fairs.
Autumn dispenses apples, wine and mirth.
Then winter sluggishly prepares the earth.

At night your gardeners spray each plant with dew.
By day your rain wakes withering plants anew.
The beasts eat at your hand and every sense
Is nourished by you with munificence.

Immortal God, grace most continual,
Be praised for ever. Keep us where we shall
Best serve your purpose, now and when we die

Safe in the shadow of your wings that fly.

Lament VIII
by Jan Kochanowski
(1530-1584)
[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

This house grows very empty now you've gone
My dearest Ursula, and there is not one
Among the many who remain with me
Who can replace your vanished soul; or free
Us from the misery of your absent song,
Your talks and jokes that got the facts all wrong.
You hid in corners and your mother smiled.
You tugged your father's sleeve and so beguiled
Him from the thoughts that soured his bit of brain
You laughed as you embraced them both again.
But now you're silent and these empty rooms
Hold nothing playful to dispose their glooms,
Our sorrows squat in corners: and delight
Is what we search for vainly, day and night.

Franciszek Dionizy Kniażnin

Composed During a Journey
by Franciszek Dionizy Kniażnin
(1750-1807)
[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

With love's bolt buried in my heart I could
Not travel far on this unwilling trip.
I wanted to stay near my greatest good
And drink the nectar of championship.
We, and we only, understand the mystery
    Who make its secret history.

Past joys reproached me, joys that had been short
But now prolonged my longing, night and day.
Affliction pained me though sweet birds made sport:
Swan's down seemed rough; and blue skies looked like grey.
Nor could friends help: no witty conversation
    Changed my grief's persuasion.

Except that I am always sorrowing
I don't know what goes on within my heart.
The flame is constant and my ardours ring
True--as you know they have rung from the start.
Real love has kindled it: the bright flame dances
Within my inmost fancies.

You yourself witnessed my acute distress
When I left Warsaw, though I loved the town.
And Minsk was worse: what sadness name compress!
Sieltse misted as my tears fell down.
Wisnitsa, where I spent the night in sorrow,
Promised no tomorrow.

Both Brzesc and Terespol wondered to see
Such love as Love has forced me to confess.
Koden, Rozanka: boredom, misery:
Yet there I sang of loving tenderness.
In each a song was offered you, my treasure.
And grief to give you pleasure.

But now my bitterness is almost over.
I can begin to count the minutes now.
Soon, at your feet, your ever-constant lover
Will kneel down humbly to renew his vow
Of steadfast faith, and pledge himself once more
To suffer and adore.

Elzbieta Druzbacka

Pleas for the Improvement of Polish Morals
by Elzbieta Druzbacka
(1695-1765)

I was born and raised in Poland;
I live in a free country, and I partake of that freedom also.
I am permitted to raise my voice against those actions
I do not approve of. I shall never praise with a servile pen
The bad habits
Which some people brought to our country
Under this or that guise.
The speech, the style of writing, the outrageous sycophancy are such
That can be compared to the manners of ancient Babylon.
It is distressing to see how other nations
Laugh and criticize these new Polish fashions.

And the authors who brought them in are supposed to be
Sophisticated!
I am not a stork, but if I were one
I would have swallowed all those reptiles
For I am afraid that some of the eggs brought to Poland
Will hatch, produce basilisks, and poison the entire Polish population.
I know I am not suited to raise a morals crusade,
My task is to stick to the needle and loom,
But I have the right to ask, my love for Poland forces me to do so,
And I do not want foreigners to laugh at us openly.

Antoni Malczewski

The Window Curtain
by Antoni Malczewski
(1793-1826)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

He watched the full moon topple his full height
On the black grass among the shapes of night.
Serene and bright her revolutions run!
But then her eyes are fixed upon the sun.
The knight's head bowed. Her smile derisively
Lit her plump features as she watched him sigh.
Grief filled his mind. Confused emotions wrought
A void that killed remorse and stilled all thought.
Remembrance lapsed. All joys hung in suspense,
All loves, and each accoutrement of sense.
He neared the sleeping house, silent as it.
Its muteness was by one pale treasure lit,
One rich enchantment like an Arabian tale's.
But what was that? His courage almost fails
Until he sees above his black despair
An opening bedroom window brightening where,
As though directing travelers through the trees,
A flimsy curtain flirts with the coy breeze,
Drawing the wind into the room, and then
Modestly pushing it away again.
O what a pleasant flood of fire then steals
Through every vein! What happiness he feels!
Who could resist? That madness scorched his bones.
He was no virtuous statue made of stones.
His arts were courteous faith, to love and fight.
He reached her room in seconds. But delight
Withered. The bed was neat. Maria lay

There in her funeral robes.

Adam Mickiewicz

The Prisoner's Return

by Adam Mickiewicz
(1798-1855)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

Him! So I rushed. "But there will be a spy.
Don't go today." I made another try
The morning after. Police thugs at the door.
The next week, too, I went. "His health is poor."
And then, at last, when travelling out of town
They told me that a fat but broken-down
Fellow was my friend. His hair had gone; his skin
Was a puffed sponge that wrinkles burrowed in.
Bad food had done it, that and rotten air.
I never would have known him, sitting there.
I said good day. He couldn't place my face.
I introduced myself, but not a trace
Of recognition. Then I reminded him
Of this and that. His glance grew deep, kept dim.
And all his daily tortures, all the fears
Of sleepless nights, and all the thoughts, the years,
I saw; but only a moment: then
A monstrous veil descended once again.
His pupils, like thick glass refracting light,
Looked grey when stared at but could shine with bright
Patterns of rainbows when glimpsed from the side.
Cobwebs are like that too: their grey threads hide
Sparks and rust-reds and spots of black and green.
Yet in those pupils nothing could be seen.
Their surface, quite opaquely, showed that they
Had lain a long time in the damp dark clay.

Next month I called on him, hoping to find
A man at ease, refreshed, in his right mind.
But many questioners had had their say,
Ten thousand sleepless nights had passed away,
Too many torturers had probed, and he
Had learned that shadows make good company
And silence is the only right reply.
The city, in a month, could not defy
The laws that had been taught him year by year.
Day was a traitor, sunlight a spy: his fear

Made turnkeys of his family, hangmen of guests.
The door's click meant: "More questions. More arrests."
He'd turn his back, prop head on hand, and wait
Collecting strength enough to concentrate.
His lips pressed tight to make them one thin line.
He hid his eyes lest they should give some sign,
And any sign might tell them what he thought.
The simplest question seemed to have him caught.
He'd crouch in shadows, crying "I won't talk."
Because his mind was made of prison rock
So that his cell went with him everywhere.
His wife wept long, kneeling beside his chair.
But maybe it was mostly his child's tears
That, finally, released him from his fears.

I thought he'd tell his story in the end.
(Ex-convicts like to speak to an old friend
About their prison days.) I'd learn the truth,
The truth that tyrants hide, the Polish truth.
It flourishes in shadows. Its history
Lives in Siberia where its heroes die,
There and in dungeons. But what did my friend say?
He said he had forgotten. And, with dismay,
I listened to his silence. His memory was
Written upon, and deeply, but, because
It had long rotted in the dark, my friend
Could not read what was written: "We'd better send
For God. He will remember and tell us all."

Over the great clear pool
by Adam Mickiewicz
(1798-1855)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

Over the great dear pool
Rocks ranged in steep files:
Water, transparent and cool,
Reflected their black faces.

Over the great clear pool
Black clouds chased for miles:
Water, transparent and cool,
Reflected their dwindling traces.

Over the great dear pool
Lightning burst, thunder spread.

Water, transparent and cool,
Reflected the light: the sound fled.
Clear as before, the pool
Lay, transparent and cool.

This pool surrounds me and
I reflect what's to see
Whether me rocks still stand
Or lightning flashes free.

Black rocks forebode me ill.
The clouds have rain to spill.
Loud lightning has to glow.
I have to flow, to flow . . .

Juliusz Slowacki

Hymn
by Juliusz Slowacki
(1809-1849)
[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960]

Master, my heart is sore. Your radiant West
Pours out its rainbows for me, while your deep
Blue waters quench me star that burns in quest
Of everlasting sleep:
Yet though you gild the skyline, sea and shore,
Master, my heart is sore.

Erect, like empty husks of corn, I am
Void of both pleasure and satiety.
Greeting a stranger, I can still seem calm
Though silent as this sky.
In front of you I must say something more.
Master, my heart is sore.
Petulant as an infant when his mother
Leaves him alone, I see the sky grow red.
Its last beams rise from water as I smother
The tear I almost shed.
Though dawn will bring fresh daylight as before,
Master, my heart is sore.

Today I watched, wedged in the blue air,
A convoy of storks, and they were flying
A hundred miles from land, still more to where
This long low land is lying.

I've seen storks race across my native moor.
Master, my heart is sore.

Since I have meditated much on death,
Since I have seldom known a home, since I
Am a poor pilgrim, trudging, out of breath,
And lightning scars the sky:
Since time still keeps my unknown grave in store,
Master. my heart is sore.

Perhaps my skeleton will whiten and
No gravestone cast its solemn shadow there,
I shall still grudge each corpse the plot of land
That keeps it safe from air.
My bed will be as restless as it's poor.
Master, my heart is sore.

At home a child will pray for me each day
Just as he has been told. And yet I know
That, as it sails, this ship takes me away,
A mile each mile we go.
And since his prayers cannot the child restore,
Master, my heart is sore.

A hundred years from now some other men
Will watch the rainbows that your angels hew
Across the starry vastness--but by then
They will be dying too.
I reach out toward the nothing at my core.
Master, my heat is sore.

Farewell

by Juliusz Słowacki

(1809-1849)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

When any poet's brightest glory shines
His words construct a statue from his fears:
Centuries will not wipe away these lines
Nor dry their tears.

While you go off into a distant land
I'm left alone to watch my exile dribble
Slowly away toward death; or, pen in hand,
To sit and scribble.

God Has Denied Me the Angelic Measure

by Juliusz Słowacki

(1809-1849)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

God has denied me the angelic measure
That marks a poet in the world of thought.
Had I possessed it earth would become a treasure
But I'm a rhymer since I have it not.

Oh, my heart rings with heavenly zones of sound
But ere they reach my lips they break apart.
Men hear a clattering when I'm around
But day and night I hear my aching heart.

It beats against my waves of blood: a star
Rings in the vast blue whirlpool of the sky.
Men in their festive halls don't hear so far:
God listens to the star until it dies.

Cyprian Norwid

Those Who Love

by Cyprian Norwid

(1821-1883)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

A woman, parents, brothers, even God
Can still be loved, but those who love them need
Some physical vestige, shadow: I have none.
Cracow is silent now that its hewn stone
Has lost what tongue it had; no banner of
Mazovian linen has been stained to prove
Art obstinate; the peasant's houses tilt;
The native ogives of our churches wilt;
Barns are too long; our patron saints are bored
With being statues; partitioned and ignored,
Form, from the fields to steeples, can't command
One homespun wand or touch one angel's hand.

But Just to See

by Cyprian Norwid

(1821-1883)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

But just to see a chapel like this room,
No bigger: there to watch Polish symbols loom
In warm expanding series which reveal
Once and for all the Poland that is real.
There the stone-cutter, mason, carpenter,
Poet, and, finally, the knight and martyr
Could re-create with pleasure, work and prayer.
There iron, bronze, red marble, copper could
Unite with native larches, stone with wood,
Because those symbols, burrowed by deep stains,
Run through us all as ores run through rock veins.

Wladyslaw Syrokomla

Epitaph for a Country Squire: D.O.M.

by Wladyslaw Syrokomla
(1823-1862)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

He beat his peasants till
They bought gin from his still.
He owned a hundred cottages
And ate his borsch with sausages.
Sipping beer, he collected
Rents, and was much respected.
Sometimes, he'd play at cards
On feasts, in the inn yards,
And talk to mine Jewish host
Over a mutton roast
About the possibility
Of peace or war and why.
One day at breakfast he ate
A leg of lamb, and ate
A hundred meat balls, tasty
With lashings and lashings of pastry.
His tummy-aches, you see,
Took him to eternity.
And now he rests at last.
In the grave he sleeps fast,
Dozing while ages travel
Overhead on the gravel.
He'll wake when an angel cries:

"Master, it's time to rise.
Steady, there now, steady.
Your roast beef is ready."

Maria Konopnicka

Waiting

by Maria Konopnicka

trans. By Watson Kirkconnell

[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish Literature***, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Once, and twice, the heavy plough
Through our land has riven now;
Black the cloven clods remain--
Waiting, sowing, waiting grain.
Seedtime, sower, come, we plead!
Do not tarry at our need.

Storms have awed the heart of earth;
Winds wail'd o'er with course of dearth;
Fruitful rain has fall'n from heaven;

Still we lack the sower's leaven!
Nation's soul and prairie soil,
Sower, wait thy vital toil!

With our fathers' bones each field
Hallow'd, grants an ampler yield;
Slow the sun dispels our shadows;
Roses tremble down the meadows,
Sower, mankind supplicates you--
Earth, the ancient, here awaits you!

Jan Kasprowicz

When Dusk Surrounds Me

by Jan Kasprowicz

(1860-1926)

trans. by Watson Kirkconnell

[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish Literature***, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

When dusk surrounds me, and a gloom that presses
The human soul to earth in harsh assize,
There haste to rescue me from my distresses

Thy shining, gentle, and sagacious eyes.

Then evil, fleeing, draws off the regresses;
Its caravan of griefs in ruin lies;
A gaze like cherub-swords its fate assesses:
Thy shining, gentle, and sagacious eyes.

Cleansed and renewed in spirit I arise,
Ready to challenge life, since changed by seeing
Thy shining, gentle, and sagacious eyes,

Then clasp this charming treasure as my prize,
And kiss, with ardent rapture in my being,
Thy shining, gentle, and sagacious eyes.

The Close of Day
by Jan Kasprowicz
(1860-1926)
trans by Watson Kirkconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Bending above my book,
I see no syllable;
But strain my weary ears
To hear if all be well.

To me no message comes
From rivers, crags, and peaks--
Only the traffic's roar
Importunately speaks.

To me no message comes
As sunset's flames depart--
Only the darkness floods
The desert of my heart.

Ah, but my mind breaks free,
And soars in eager flight
To find on sun-flush'd peaks
God's grace, before the night.

Antoni Lange

Solitude

by Antoni Lange
(1862-1929)
trans. by Adam Gillon
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Eternal solitaries--human souls,
Solitaries blown astray;
Each wanders through the Milky Way,
Each in her finite circle rolls.

Like wandering planets they gaze
At one another in the sky's blue halls;
Each in her finite circle rolls,
But never from her orbit sways.

Across the skies each must gaze,
Yearning to reach the other's hand,
But never from her orbit sways;
Alas, one wave they never shall ascend.

Each solitary yearns to shake another's hand,
Each in her nebulae still rolls;
One wave, alas, they never can ascend,
Eternal solitaries--human souls.

The Bridegroom
by Antoni Lange
(1862-1929)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Virgins waiting long with sorrow,
Bring your boughs and precious gums--
Pleat a chaplet for to-morrow:
Lo, he comes, the bridegroom comes.

Many years you've waited, weeping;
Far he seem'd, you wish'd him near--
Suddenly, while you are sleeping,
See the godlike prince appear.

He has come, like dayspring shining--
Risen, living, robed in white.
Virgins, pain'd with long repining,
Have your lamps no oil to-night?

Leopold Staff

Liberty
by Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Straiten'd am I, O Lord, upon a pillar
Of lonely pride, with scarcely room to stand:
Stiff as a corpse long cabin'd in a coffin
Are neck and knee and hand.

Beyond all else I thirst for greater freedom.
With prairies broad, I pray, my feet endow:
That I may kneel, and in the dust before Thee
Press homage with my brow.

To Love and Lose
by Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

To love and lose, to thirst and pity too,
To fall in anguish and rise up again,
To cry "Away!", yet longingly to woo--
Lo, this is life: mere vanity and pain.

Men traverse parching deserts for one gem;
For one great pearl, the ocean they explore;
Then die, and all that lingers after them
Is footprints on the sand and deep-sea floor.

Ave Aurora
by Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Arise, my heart! For in the night's high plain,
That sullen over earth and thee hath lain,

At the first flashing of the dawn's bright sword
Hacked to dark, hostile shreds away
The gloom is gone.

As in defeat the darkness takes to flight,
Greet the triumphant Sun! Exalt the Light!
New every morning let it be adored,
For still the spirit by its ray
To prayer is drawn.

Give praise, ye meadows fair, ye clouds and hills!
Sing out ye birds, yea, chant ye woods and rills!
And thou, my heart, join in with sweet accord,
For lo, in perfect grace of day
There comes the dawn.

The Golden Elegy
by Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Where is a golden goblet fill'd so deep
With golden wine as thou, in hue so bold,
O Earth, whom draughts of autumn lull to sleep
With all thy dreaming forests changed to gold?

To bud, and bear, and, after bounteous fruit,
To perish in surpassing pomp and splendor:
That were a fate serene and absolute!
My soul craves that last glory of surrender!

O Earth, our mother and our kindly nurse,
So meek in spring! But now that summer's done,
Thou hast become--while all else turns to worse--
A holy, golden sister of the sun.

Blest be the secret powers that here beget
Our dark existence with its zeal for duty--
Sending us toil and torment, blood and sweat--
If life can end in such a flame of beauty!

Then let my days in their dull series die,
Perish my yearning heart and all its pain,
If in their quiet autumn elegy

Only blue glory and gold grace remain!

Foundations
Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Adam Czerniawski
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993]

When I built upon sand
The house fell down.
When I built upon a rock
The house fell down.
This time I shall start
With chimney smoke.

Speech
Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Adam Czerniawski
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993]

You don't have to understand a nightingale's song
To admire it.
You don't have to understand the croaking of frogs
To find it intoxicating.
I understand human speech
With its duplicity and lies.
If I didn't understand it
I would be the greatest poet.

Duckweed
Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Adam Czerniawski
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993]

for Jan Parandowski

In an ancient overgrown park
I stood near a pond
Thick with a coat of weeds.
Thinking
That the water must once have been clear

And that it should be so again
I picked up a dry branch
And skimmed the green patina
Guiding it to the weir.

A sober wise man
His brow scored with thought
Surprised me at this task
Saying with a gentle smile
Of condescending rebuke:
'Don't you begrudge the time?
Each moment is a drop of eternity,
Life a twinkling of its eye.
There are so many deserving causes.'

I walked away shamed
And throughout the day
Meditated on life and death,
On Socrates
And the immortal soul,
On the pyramids and Egyptian corn,
I considered the Roman Forum and the moon,
The dinosaur and the Eiffel Tower ...
But it all came to nothing.

When I returned the following day
To the same spot
By the green-coated pond
I saw
The wise man, his brow smooth,
Quietly
Skimming the weedy surface
With the branch I had thrown away,
Guiding the green to the weir.

Birds sang in the branches
Trees rustled softly.

Portrait
Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
trans. by Adam Czerniawski
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

He was always the same

Though his face was always different
And his name always new.
The sequence of his years
Conflicted with time.
No master could render his likeness
In a single stone,
So they passed his form
From hand to hand
Like torchbearers.

An ancient master
Presented him as a powerful nude athlete
Who from his thrusting stance
Is to hurl a discus into the future;
But his gaze was fixed upon such distant goal
That for two thousand years
The discus has not left his hand
Which froze in a futile
Unfulfilled intention.

Then Donatello carved him
As the knight of Or San Michele
Where, not naked but dressed in armor,
He leans upon a shield
Marked with a cross.
But the spear, the flame of its blade upturned,
Took root in his palm
When Evil with a dragon jaw
Writhed at his feet.

Finally Michelangelo scored
Crushing with a hammer
A marble lump of dead flesh
Which the sorrowing mother
Supports by the arms
When her son can no longer bear
His own inhuman saintliness.

Three Towns
by Leopold Staff
(1878-1957)
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

They are not on the map.
They were destroyed in the war,

For in them lived people
Who were hard-working, quiet,
Peace-loving.

O tepid, indifferent brothers!
Why does none of you look for those towns?
How poor is the man who
Asks no questions.

Boleslaw Lesmian

The Soldier
by Boleslaw Lesmian
(1878-1937
trans. by Adam Gillon and Ludwik Krzyzanowski
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

In spring the soldier came from the war,
Very crippled, dull and sore.

The bullet had whipped his legs and thighs,
With weary bounds his way he plies.

Now sad leaper of his sorry fate,
The crowd is amused by his anguished gait.

His woes and sorrow are belied
By merry capers, the pain that twists his side.

He plodded to his hut, his native soil;
They said: Away you clown from our toil.

To his pal he ran, knocked on his window pane,
The sexton chased him with a cane.

Off to his mistress then he trudged. She laughed,
Shaking her arms and hips in mirth, she scoffed:

I won't dance with him in bed--he quakes,
A third of him is flesh, the rest is shakes.

You think into your quivering arms I'll rush--
Oh, no, I shan't sleep on your moustache.

You are too jumpy, leap too bold,

Go some place else, don't curse, don't scold.

Hence to a wayside statue he dragged his feet.
Christ, all of pine, think you deep.

What mocking sculptor hewed your face?
He saved on wood and on the grace.

Your crippled knees give way under their load,
You sure must jump not walk, avoid the road?

You're such a wretch, such nothing come of air,
That all my hops you certainly can share.

Upon those words Christ downward slipped,
The carver of this God--his lid had flipped.

Both hands of Christ were left, both feet were right.
His pine-feet drilled the grassy site.

"Indeed, I am a wretched clod of pine,
I'll walk eternally on foot, it's fine.

"Together we will go on common sod,
A little of man, and a little of God.

"Our torment we will share: it must be shared.
To cripple us the human hand has dared.

"Some ridicule for me--and some for you,
Who first derides shall first love too.

"Your body shall support my own, I'll lay
My pine on yours, come what may."

They linked their arms, went off without delay:
Their legs a-stumble and grotesquely gay.

They marched to chimes of endless towers,
Where are those clocks to strike those hours?

The days, the nights had passed, that had to pass.
Unreal fields and bush and woods went thus.

And a storm arose and endless dark,
An absence of sun, terrible, stark.

What creature from the northern stormy whine
Appears to very human, so divine?

They are two cripples, pitiful and odd,
They limp into a world of God.

One not bereaved, the other walks in joy,
Bound in a love that cannot be destroyed.

God limped, man limped--their measure none too low.
What in them limped no man shall ever know.

They hopped so low and they hopped so high,
Until at last they reached the very sky.

Julian Tuwim

A Prayer
by Julian Tuwim
(1894-1953)
trans. by Wanda Dynowska
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

I pray Thee O Lord
From all my heart,
O Lord! I pray to Thee.
With fervor and zeal,
For the sufferings of the humiliated,
For the uncertainty of those who wait;
For the non-return of the dead;
For the helplessness of the dying;
For the sadness of the misunderstood,
For those who request in vain;
For all those abused, scorned and disdained:
For the silly, the wicked, the miserable;
For those who hurry in pain
To other nearest physician;
Those who return from work
With trembling and anguished hearts to their homes;
For those who are roughly treated and pushed aside,
For those who are hissed on the stage;
For all who are clumsy, ugly, tiresome and dull,
For the weak, the beaten, the oppressed,
For those who cannot find rest

During long sleepless nights;
For those who are afraid of Death,
For those who wait in pharmacies,
For those who have missed the train,
--For all the inhabitants of our earth
And all their pains and troubles,
Their worries, sufferings, disappointments,
All their griefs, afflictions, sorrows,
Longings, failures, defeats;
For everything which is not joy,
Comfort, happiness, bliss--...
Let these shine forever upon them
With tender love and brightness,
I pray Thee O Lord most fervently--
I pray Thee O Lord from the depths of my heart.

Wife
by Julian Tuwim
(1894-1953)
[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry, 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

My husband is idle, is dumb and spends money.
He either stands still at the window or runs about town like a bunny.

He stares and he stares, at a tram, at the sky.
He mutters, he whistles, he rummages over the house like an amateur spy.

And then he reads books: he turns their pages at least.
There are books in the kitchen and cellar; folios mixed with the yeast.

But what is he thinking about? What does my husband mumble?
When he tries to speak he gets nervous: piles of words flurry and tumble.

In the evening he drinks, and I feel angry enough
When I see his dear eyes getting misted up with that stuff.

His eyes are misted. He takes one more dram.
He kneels down beside me and lays his head on my arm.
It is only then that I learn for the first time who I am.

Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz

The Brotherhood of Man
by Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz
(1894-1980)

trans. by Adam Gillon and Ludwik Krzyzanowski
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

O Wanderer, if ever you approach the banks of river Seine,
the Place d'Alma in Paris,
you will observe a figure cut of bronze, standing upon a column.
The figure is not tall,
his coat is borne aloft by the breath of wind, and he extends his arm:
Thus stands, forever going somewhere, Mickiewicz--our prophet,
turned into a wind,
a wind that blows across the wastes.
It is our father, Adam,
who heralded to all the peoples of earth eternal love
and brotherhood.
When tempests rage upon the ocean, and many-storied waves clap
against each other,
emitting sounds like many thousands clapping hands,
and toss ships and fishing boats against the rocks,
and cast men upon the waters of the sea, their heads bobbing
like wooden logs from shipwrecks--
then suddenly the clouds are rent asunder, like grey curtains upon
the stage, and a solitary ray falls,
like a gigantic arrow, or a chord that joins the sky with sea, and
the sea is calmed, and the vessels creep to their ports, lowering their
tattered sails,
as a mother standing over her son's grave drops her arms.
And the ray upon the turgid but already clearer wave
draws the word: pax, pax, pax ...
Thus we too await for heavens to draw open and to give a sign
to all of us, to clasp our hands,
and to exclaim as that ray of sun:
pax.
Why are you waiting, boys and girls? Why are you standing in rows before the high stands? Why are your hearts pounding--and for what reason? Why are all your eyes fixed on one spot, where the flag is hoisted on the mast, climbing like a longshoreman? Why does the sea of your heads fill the vast stadium in silence?
Why
do you not shout all together, white, black, and yellow men:
pax, pax, pax?
I glance at your with fear. Perhaps there are those among you whose bodies and souls are touched by the plague?
Perhaps there are those who hide their s

Look, I draw the curtain
and show to you a flat and spacious land, a valley through which flows Vistula, stretching her neck like a swan at night,
a valley which slumbers in autumn mists, and falls into the drifts of winter snow,
and at times awakens, red with fiery sunsets,
the land covered with manifold grain
and forests--
The grain of this land is the hiding place for beasts and men, for the Iman who grew among the tall rye,
and trod upon the poppies and corn flowers.
The forests whose shadows covered the men who fought for every harbor of peace, every anchor of hope, and every shred of life.
This is the brotherhood of Man!

You see those tall chimneys and the smoke above? Here are men who burn other men, here the conquerors--
those who have no chance to fight even for a single breath.
No traitors' bodies hang from pear trees in the fields.
Judas, the conqueror, hangs upon the knotted trees those men who couldn't even die.
The endless roads of this land
are trod by the iron heel of the trained rabble who trample human brains and skulls, torn bowels, limbs, who trample on the cries and thoughts of men, their lives and hopes, illusions and impatiences and pain--
This is the brotherhood of Man!

Upon overgrown plateaus those who are dying of thirst groan pitifully,
the blue tunics of soldiers press into the bread tree shadows,
and black corpses in the coffee groves
and green flies like leaven on faces
buzzing like poor fiddles
murmuring like water which isn't there, which isn't there.
The chieftains of fabulous lands--peeled mango fruits,
hang like ducks impaled on spitsk,
and soldiers with torn bellies
buzz with moans like flies!
In thickets of lianas and roots, beneath the mangrove shadow gleam the petals of orchids and victoria regia.
hearts ripped and dripping with blood,
eyes open and plucked with the knife of terror
from the festering orbs of ignorance.

Murdered man, murdered woman, murdered people, buried alive, shot, killed, strangled, executed, knived, gassed--
This is the brotherhood of Man!

In the deserts, steppes, taiga, forests, jungles, icy expanse and stretches of sand,

in hovels, houses, palaces, shelters, mud huts, cellars,
on all the earth,
fear now dwells and whispers into everybody's ear
ever more terrifying thoughts,
ever more gruesome visions:
eyes covered with sores, babies born like monsters, the flowers of black death blooming in the armpits, dried blood on lips, vermin feeding on living bodies
and on the bodies of the dead.
Fear for everything: the houses, gardens, souls, existence, for seas lest they dry out, for mountains lest they cave in, for trees lest they burn,
for children,
for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
This is the brotherhood of Man!

You, handsome, white, strong men! You who resemble the eternal gods of Hellas! You, whose eyes and souls shine like sparks
when you stand thus
and when the swarm of your eyes flies like bees towards the spot where the flag crawls up the mast like a sailor, when the sea of your heads fills the gigantic stadium as black and white grapes fill a wicker basket,
when you open your mouths, to give out the words of joy
like round balloons soaring into the sky,
like golden fish floating in dark-blue oceans,
like fragrance of flowers borne by summer breeze,
think of all those who could not cry out before they died!
Think of those whose mouths were sealed with plaster, and of those felled by bullets before they could cry out, of those whose eyes were filled with blood and who could not cast as glance upon the sky,
as you look upon it now,
nor on the victorious banner,
because they died in degradation--
and think about the brotherhood of Man!

And if you cannot fight for man
and if you too take to swords and rifles
and kill your brothers--
mankind shall not attain salvation.

Think, think of this now.
Think of happiness and freedom.
For only the struggle for good can win goodness
and only the degradation of evil can elevate goodness
and only the brotherhood of man can raise upon the mast
the Olympic flag, great as the world.

Take each other's hand and sing:

Pax, pax, pax--
To signify the brotherhood of Man.

Maria Pawlikowska

Love
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982]

It is month now since I saw you last.
Sure, it is nothing. I may show more care,
Lips very mute, a face of paler cast:
But it is hard to live, devoid of air!

Three Verses About Love
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Frances Notley
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982]

WHO LOVES TODAY ...

For love today are thistles but no rose,
By no straight, easy highway shall she fare!
Who loves today, will never know repose,
Bread without husks, or day without its care....

LOVE'S HEAVIEST BURDEN

Of bitter loves most bitter under the sun
Is not that first, which wakens with the Spring,
And strange illusions and deceits may bring,
But this, from care now dying: old though we may be
Love burns more ardently....

I SHALL RETURN NO MORE

"I shall return no more! Now let God throw me
Far to the distant stars! Since unforgivably
This world afflicts me" "Yes, but Love blooms here,
Love like an orchid strange and solitary ...
Ah, will you not return?"

Roses, Forests and the World
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Frances Notley
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

No time to regret the roses when the woods are burning--
No time to regret the forests when the whole world burns,
When the expanse of earth as one Sahara lies....
No time to regret the world when Chaos now returns ...

No one he hour knows or the day discloses,
When God, struck to the heart by earth's distracted sphere,
Fell, and rose up, a lion in his wrath!--
When every night is black with grief and fear....

Yet for myself I weep and I regret the roses.

A Girl Speaks
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Frances Notley
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Listen, young soldier, you who passing by
Possessed me with a strange, distracted glance
Which I so swiftly caught--O, then I felt
A sudden flood of tender consciousness;
Pride and a sad reproach were in your eyes,
Blue, with black lashes sweetening them for love....
Surely, I know what you would say to me:
"O to the war I go and I may perish ...
Girl-woman, with your body's gift of life,
Sons you will bear for martial death. Weep then,
Weep in my mother's stead for me! O sigh
With helpless, unavailing tenderness!
Look, in my hands I bring flowers for farewell!"

And then to you my eyes would make reply:
"You move me, handsome lad. But pit me,
I beg you. We are comrades in this war,
You in the field as I am in the town.
One heavy shell will strike without compassion,

Will level us to earth and hurl us down,
Both equal then in common sacrifice.
For us one grave and one forgetfulness,
Or else one happy chance. Throw me your flowers!"

Victory
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Thou'rt like the Parian "Victory" from Samothrace,
O Love of mine, unsilenced by life's harms!
Though slain, you run the same all-ardent race,
And still hold out your bleeding stumps of arms....

Virtues
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

'Tis little, Lord, that I can see
In all the virtues men profess.
One virtue only I possess:
I love my enemy.

A Bird
by Maria Pawlikowska
(1899-1945)
trans. by Watson Kirkconnell
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

A dying bird seeks solitude to hide;
Far from the gaze of all it fain would flee;
And many a human heart has turned aside
In its last hour to die in secrecy.

Kazimiera Illakowicz

Moth
by Kazimiera Illakowicz

(1892-)

trans. by Adam Gillon

[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

It's not a blind and downy moth I see--
it's me.
Out of the dark I fly, emerge from ash-trees, lindens
and oaks, toward the glowing windows.
Of your window panes I miss none,
I break against every one,
I long for the lamp, for the candle I cry ...
To death, to death, to my death I fly.

Psalm

by Kazimiera Illakowicz

(1892-)

trans. by Adam Gillon

[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Begetter of mornings, dawns and winds,
O Heavenly Father!

I, Joseph Wittlin, of the tribe of Judah,
stand before Thee in the bareness of my sins,
that my unworthy lips may stammer out Thy greatness.

Fearfully, I perceive my heart is sinking
toward the earth
which Thy foot so rarely touches now.
Before I am wholly consumed by earthly love,
I wish, with the remnants of my childhood,
to sing a psalm to Thee.
Let it remain with Thee, a hostage of my faith,
until the hour of my death.
And if I ever do deny Thee,
let it redeem me in Thine eyes.

Praised, praised be Thou,
Eternal Lord, be praised for ever and ever!
Be praised in the tongue of the living,
as Thou wert revered in the tongue of those that are dead.
Be Thou praised in Polish, in English, in German, in French,
in Hebrew, Arabic and Chinese,
and in the countless number of tongues to which Thou hast given singularity
that day when Thou hast confused the only speech of man,

for the sin of the Babel Tower.

And be Thou praised with the lowing of cattle,
with the neighing of horses, the bleating of sheep, the barking of dogs, the mewing of cats,
and the drone of all insects.
And be Thou praised with the chirping of birds:
Let the lark warble to Thee in the heat of day,
let the nightingale trill to Thee on a tranquil night,
let the cuckoo and the turtle-dove sing Thee
on every day.
Let the stork rattle Thy glory on the 19th of March every year,
and let the woodpecker, true to our land all year, knock to Thee!
But to Thee let the raven croak over the soldier's corpse,
let him croak over the carrion of the disgraced man.
Be praised with the roar of wild animals and praised
with the silence of fish.

And be praised all instruments,
created by the hand of man.
The plaintive violin and flute and oboe affecting the human voice
and the tender harp and the clamorous organ,
which are played in Thy houses,
let them ring deeply with Thy grandeur,
for into the musical instruments Thou hast set Thy soul!
Everything on the earth that has a voice should sound
Thy beauty!
O Thou art fair in all the voices unheard by the deaf!

Therefore praised be Thou, praised,
praised be Eternal Lord through all colors.
The green hue with which Thou has painted the grass, adores Thee,
the white and the violet bow before Thee!
The gold and the silver, the fiery red and the purple of blood
bid Thee welcome,
and especially the sky-blue sweetly drawn from Thy heavens.
And be Thou greeted by color black which is sad,
for it arouses sorrow within us.
O, Thou art comely in all colors unseen by the blind!

Be Thou praised with all the odors which Thy earth produces.
All corn, which the poor want for their bread;
all plants, from the most precious herbs
to the meanest origin,
let them bow to Thee, sway for Thee, give Thee their fragrance!
And be Thou praised with the smell of sweat

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of the man who bears the burdens of life,
and carries coal and stone
and hoists chests from ship to land!
O Thou art comely in all scents which will never
reach the nostrils of the prisoner.

And be Thou praised with all fruit, whose taste contains sweetness,
and with all weeds that issue bitterness
and a tart poisonous juice!
Be praised with the salt tears that stream from the eyes of man,
and with the acid vinegar with which they quenched the thirst of
Him that died on the Cross.
Praised, O praised be Thou Eternal Lord
with the taste of our daily bread and the taste of water and the taste of wine,
praised be Thou with the flesh and blood of Thy Son
and praised with the despair and lament
of those that are hungry
and clamor that Thou art not!

Be Thou greeted with the grievance of widows,
And the wailing of mothers,
Whose sons perished in the war.
Be greeted with the abandonment of orphans; therein an increase
of Thy great love.
Thus one day Thou hast also descended to me,
hast caressed me,
hast shaken hands with my sorrow,
and my sorrow has lived since in the shadow of Thy mercy!

O be Thou praised with the madness of men,
whom Thou hast ordered to be evil,
from whose eyes Thou hast extinguished light,
and they live and perish in darkness.
O be praised with health and disease,
and the sacred frenzy of poets:--
they bore Thy spark!

Be praised with all beauty that can be begotten by the souls
of unknown men,
whom Thou has not endowed with the pride of the artist,
O Lord of the meek!
Be praised, O praised with the beauty of works conceived by Thine own hands!
The low whisper of the Nile, the holy murmur of the Ganges, the sadness of the Jordan,
they stream with me down to Thy knees.
All rivers which I have never seen,
but only imagined in name,

proceed with me unto Thee
O Thou Nameless, with a hundred names, named a hundred times, O Thou Silent Ocean!
And knowest Thou who else praiseth Thee?
This little brook in Nagozhany, in that village where I spent my childhood
so little that it has not even a name among men!
But for Thee it has a name,
Thou knowest it, Thou canst hear its faint murmur,
as thou hearest all weak and wretched voice
that sings today Thy glory.

The two of us, that brook and I, stream toward Thee in the solitary nook
of Polish land,
we call on Thee. Thou hast counted us too,
we trust Thee. Thou rememberst us,
we desire Thee. Thou shalt not leave us,
we cry to Thee: Hosanna!

Hosanna, Hosanna! For ever and ever, Amen.
Halleluiah, halleluiah! For ever and ever--Amen.

And be Thou praised with the prayer of those that believe not in Thee

Antoni Slonimski

All
by Antoni Slonimski
(1895-1976)
trans. by Wanda Dynowska
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer, 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

In Tolouse or Ankara, in Hungary or Scotland,
Lisbon, or Dakar or London, the wave is carrying us forward,
Further and further from our way back to our homes.
For what are we fighting, for what are we longing?
What treasures tremendous have we lost?
Not for glory nor riches are we wandering in pain,
For a greater and more sacred cause.
Not at world domination we aim, we dream of freedom.

To enjoy the calm of big, old shadowy trees,
The peaceful hours of sunset in our dear village-home,
Lost in listening the soft humming of bees,
The neigh of horses grazing on meadows,
When the dark night is approaching...

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We don't want to rule over others, we want to share bread
In all justice with our own people, at home,
We dream to walk freely through our well-known roads,
And look happily into the deep, starry sky
And sleep in peace under its blue vault
It's so little, and yet it's *all*.

Jan Lechon

Love and Death
by Jan Lechon
(1899-1955)
trans. by Watson Kirconnell
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982]

You seek to know my life's essential theme?--
I answer: Love and Death are both supreme.
Love's eyes are blue, but Death's deep eyes are dark;
These are the twain that fire me with their spark.

Through skies unstarr'd across the black night cast,
They ride the interplanetary blast,--
That whirlwind whose great tides our lives enmesh
In endless grief of soul and joy of flesh.

Our days are ground in querns and sifted deep;
We dig in life for truth, with mine-shafts steep,
And find one changeless moral for our breath:
That Death in Love take refuge, Love in Death.

Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyñski

Monument of a Student
by Konstanty Galczynski
(1905-1953)
trans. by Margaret Dunn
[from ***Introduction to Modern Polish*** *Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982]

In a certain Polish city--the truth must now be told,
A statue of a student stands, admired by young and old;

The monument is made of bronze, the base is bronze as well,
Of bronze is the story the allegories tell.

The student's books, a globe, a lamp, an owl in his prime,
All these the artist's craftsmanship captured for all time.

After that the artist called down a mighty curse--
His payment wasn't adequate to fill his slender purse.

But that's no matter now--for us the monument's the thing:
A student stands upon the base, around him tatters cling.

His well-work coat is full of holes, the wind blows freely through,
It's held together by a pin, but this is broken too.

The bottom of his overcoat, which should be quite concealing,
Is decorated with a hold--a little too revealing!

But his lips are parted in a smile, his hands prepare to clasp
A greatly needed scholarship just within his grasp.

Written on the pedestal we see this dedication:
THIS MONUMENT WAS CAST IN BRONZE, ERECTED BY THE NATION

IN HONOR OF HER DEAREST CHILDREN, THOSE FORGOTTEN STUDENTS
WHO BECAUSE OF IGNORANCE--PERHAPS THEY CALLED IT PRUDENCE--

FOR MANY REASONS NOW UNKNOWN (POSSIBLY THE FEES)
DID NOT COMPLETE THEIR STUDIES, WERE GRANTED NO DEGREES.

A student who's alive will be the cause of sad laments,
But--it's the truth--we Poles will always cherish monuments.

A Lyrical Exchange

by Konstanty Ildefons Galczyñski
(1905-1953)
trans. by Barry Keane

-Tell me how much you love me?
-I'll tell.
-Well.
-I love you in the sun. In candlelight flushes.
I love you in your cap and beret,
Upon a windy open road, at a concert or play.
Among lilac, birch, maple and raspberry bushes.
When you are sleeping, or are hard at work.

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When you clearly crack an egg,
Even when you drop the spoon.
In a taxi or car. I am coursed, I shall never bend.
At the beginning of a road or its extreme end.
And parting your hair with a comb.
In danger. On a merry-go-round at a fairground meet.
At the sea, in the mountains. In boots or bare feet.
Today, yesterday, tomorrow. Night and day.
In springtime when the swallows hold sway.
-And in summer how do you love me?
-With the depth of a year.
-And in autumn with clouds and humours?
-Even when you lose umbrellas.
-And when winter's patterns are on the window pane?
-In winter I love you like a merry dancing flame
Close to your heart it embers and glows
While outside in the snow, the crowing crows.

Boleslaw Leśmian

Memories

by Boleslaw Leśmian

(1879-1937)

[from *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry 1450-1950*, ed. by Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer, Secker & Warburg, London, 1960.]

Those paths I brushed
With the feet of a child--where have they gone?
They roll down as tears do, hushed,
Out of the eyes, down, down.

The freshness of morning would wake me up.
The sun would be painting a masterpiece.
A golden coast--a golden pup,
A golden guitar--a golden precipice.

Stare. Stare sufficiently into the light
From the midst of a great silence, and in a while
You are bound to see a camel shining bright,
A bright-eyed robber with a glistening smile.

At breakfast the table became a desert. I stared
Till I rode the camel and I saw the gleaming thief.
Father, assured of his safety, never despaired
But read his paper calmly, rustling a leaf.

A triple rainbow embroidered the carafe,
The tablecloth, the cupboard, father's moustache.
A wasp, entangled in the lace curtains, would laugh
And the curtains laughed too, their threads in the sun, a bright patch.

And the rich floor, dreamily glittering, mirrored it all:
The leaves of the palm shone brighter at the back
But melted shallowly, and a thin glaze would fall
As if someone had spilled greenery by mistake.

The arm-chair sipping its own velvet peace
Would grow heavier, comfortably, I think.
The sugar would plot for a blue spark's release
And the loaf of bread would turn pink.

The clock shakes free of its long compressed coils and booms
A prolonged note through the hall to the sky.
In that furnished day-dreaming among the sunny rooms
Everybody endures and does not die.

But something happened: something went wrong.
The same clock struck, but shyly, in another town.
The soul stumbled over the body that had grown too strong,
And they began to die, one by one.

Kazimierz Wierzyński

A Word to Orphists

by Kazimierz Wierzyński

(1894-1969)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Who is standing behind me I don't know, but I know he is there,
What he is saying I don't know, but I repeat after him,
I don't hear the words, but I am able to write them down
And this is so important that I ask no questions.

There was a time when I looked backward,
I wanted to see into his eyes,
But he vanished before I could grasp his shape.
Then I moved about confounded and since he would not appear
I dried into dust, I faded
Into an absurdity, colourless and human.

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In the morning I would sit at my desk and hold a pencil,
I knew what I wanted to write and felt I could not do it,
I waited till night as it is easier for him to come in the dark,
To stop behind me and, unseen, whisper.

But no, he would not come. I would take a forgotten manuscript
And read aloud those words from behind my shoulder, from beyond me,
I would ask: how did it all come to me?
And I called out: after all this is from you,
Respond, you who are inscrutable.
No more shall I look backward.

Then I understood the true fate of Orpheus,
That love is a constant terror of loss.
So I call to you, Orphists, if any of you will trust me,
Repeat the whispered words you hear,
Do not look to see who stands behind you.
It is good, it is marvelous that he exists.

Aleksander Wat

Before Breughel the Elder
by Aleksander Wat
(1900-1967)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czesław Miłosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Work is a blessing.
I tell you that, I--professional sluggard!
Who slobbered in so many prisons! Fourteen!
And in so many hospitals! Ten! And innumerable inns!
Work is a blessing.
How else could we deal with the lava of fratricidal love towards fellow men?
With those storms of extermination of all by all?
With brutality, bottomless and measureless?
With the black and white era which does not want to end
Endlessly repeating itself da capo like a record
Forgotten on a turntable
Spinning by itself?
Or perhaps someone invisible watches over the phonograph? Horror!
How, if not for work, could we live in the paradise of social hygienists
Who never soak their hands in blood without aseptic gloves?
Horror!
How else could we cope with death?
That Siamese sister of life

Who grows together with it--in us, and is extinguished with it
And surely for that reason is ineffective.
And so we have to live without end,
Without end. Horror!
How, if not for work, could we cope with ineffective death
(Do not scoff!)
which is like a sea,
where everyone is an Icarus, one of nearly three billion,
while besides, so many things happen
and everything is equally unimportant, precisely, unimportant
although so difficult, so inhumanly difficult, so painful!
How then could we cope with all that?
Work is our rescue.
I tell you that--I, Breughel, the Elder (and I, for one,
your modest servant, Wat, Aleksander)--work is our rescue.

from Persian Parables
by Aleksander Wat
(1900-1967)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

By a great, swift water
On a stony bank
A human skull was lying
And shouting: Allah la ilah

And in that cry such horror
And such supplication
So great was its despair
That I asked the helmsman

For what can it still cry out? Of what is it still afraid?
What divine judgement could strike it yet again?

Suddenly there came a wave
Took hold of the skull
And tossing it about
Smashed it against the bank.

Nothing is ultimate
--the helmsman's voice was hollow--
and there is no bottom to evil

A Flamingo's Dream
by Aleksander Wat

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(1900-1967)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Water water water. And nothing but water.
If only an inch of land! An inch of no-matter-what land!
To set one foot on! If only!

We begged the gods for that! All of them!
Water gods, land gods, southern gods, northern gods,
For an inch, a strip, a scrap of any kind of land!
No more than just to support a claw of one foot!
And nothing. Only water. Nothing except water.
Water water water.
If only a speck of land!
There is no salvation.

from 'Notes Written in Obory'

by Aleksander Wat

(1900-1967)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

X was asked
If he believed in the objective existence of
Parzota.
--To believe in the objective existence of Parzota--
that smacks of mysticism,
--I am an old horse, you know, and a staunch
rationalist
answered X.
The sequel was more interesting.

X persisted in his refusal to believe in the objective
existence of Parzota
Who, the said Parzota, placed him in a dungeon, put him
to torture.

Yet everything would have been in perfect order
if not for one sad circumstance:
the stupid man of principle was so obstinate that he died
in the dungeon.
Poor Parzota! Condemned to eternal doubt.
Now he will never find out
If he existed objectively.

Mieczysław Jastrun

Remembrance
by Mieczysław Jastrun
(1903-1983)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

When the crowd surrounded those dragged to death
You heard voices sneering at them,
You heard a cry, you looked at living eyes.
The sky was burning. The breeze was filled with smoke.

And you have come back to your native land
As one comes back to life. You look: a flower
Is being born of earth, fertile, much too fertile.
Like remorse, the distant trace of smoke turns blue,
The smell of burning is dispelled.
Shadows are pale.

The fragrance in the air is like a preparation
For new stems, for not-yet-spoken words.
The chestnuts are in bloom, and in the rusty wounds
Of earth, grass is at work, stitching up the web.
Buds are gluey, and in hazel thickets
The sound of water once again.

For whom is delight? Revelation of strength?
For whom is the nightingale in the tangle of young trees?
Its song erupts, breaks off, as if fountains
Of light were gushing up against the sky--

And far more hostile, more indifferent
than all that common and inhuman grave
is the beauty of the earth. And he that lost himself
in the beauty of words as in some longed-for face--
his songs are pure, too pure. They will be overbalanced
by blood mixed with earth.

Tymoteusz Karpowicz

Love
by Tymoteusz Karpowicz
(born 1921)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

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I believed:
a tree when kissed
would not lose its leaves--
leaves fall
from kissed
trees.

A river hugged
by a hand in love
would not flow away--
it flows away
into fog.

There are in my landscape
errors of colours and scents
yet always
always I love
what incessantly
changes.

As a golden ball
she runs before me:
approached again and again,
my beloved,
Earth.

Zbigniew Herbert

The Rain
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983]

When my older brother
came back from war
he had on his forehead a little silver star
and under the star
an abyss

a splinter of shrapnel
hit him at Verdun
or perhaps at Grünwald
(he'd forgotten the details)

he used to talk much
in many languages
but he liked most of all
the language of history

until losing breath
he commanded his dead pals to run
Roland Kowalski Hannibal

he shouted
that this was the last crusade
that Carthage soon would fall
and then sobbing confessed
that Napoleon did not like him

we looked at him
getting paler and paler
abandoned by his senses
he turned slowly into a monument

into musical shells of ears
entered a stone forest
and the skin of his face
was secured
with the blind dry
buttons of eyes

nothing was left him
but touch

what stories he told with his hands
in the right he had romances
in the left soldier's memories

they took my brother
and carried him out of town
he returns every fall
slim and very quiet
(he does not want to come in)
he knocks at the window for me

we walk together in the streets
and he recites to me
improbable tales
touching my face
with blind fingers of rain

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Jonah

by Zbigniew Herbert

(1924-1998)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czesław Miłosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah
Jonah of Amittai
running away from a dangerous mission
boarded a ship sailing
from Joppa to Tarshish

the well-known things happened
great wind tempest
the crew casts Jonah forth into the deep
the sea ceases from her raging
the foreseen fish comes swimming up
three days and three nights
Jonah prays in the fish's belly
Which vomits him out at last
On dry land

the modern Jonah
goes down like a stone
if he comes across a whale
he hasn't time even to gasp

saved
he behaves more cleverly
than his biblical colleague
the second time he does not take on
a dangerous mission
he grows a beard
and far from the sea
far from Nineveh
under an assumed name
deals in cattle and antiques
agents of Leviathan
can be bought
they have no sense of fate
they are the functionaries of chance

in a neat hospital
Jonah dies of cancer
himself not knowing very well
who he really was

the parable
applied to his head
expires
and the balm of the legend
does not take to his flesh

Our Fear
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Our fear
Does not wear a night shirt
Does not have owl's eyes
Does not lift a casket lid
Does not extinguish a candle

Does not have a dead man's face either

Our fear is a scrap of paper
Found in a pocket
'warn Wojcik
the place on Dluga Street is hot'

our fear
does not rise on the wings of the tempest
does not sit on a church tower
it is down-to-earth

it has the shape
of a bundle made in haste
with warm clothing
provisions
and arms

our fear does not have the face of a dead man
the dead are gentle to us
we carry them on our shoulders
sleep under the same blanket
close their eyes
adjust their lips
pick a dry spot
and bury them

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not too deep
not too shallow

The Pebble
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

The pebble
is a perfect creature

equal to itself
mindful of its limits

filled exactly
with a pebbly meaning

with a scent which does not remind one of anything
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire

its ardour and coldness
are just and full of dignity

I feel a heavy remorse
when I hold it in my hand
and its noble body

is permeated by false warmth

--Pebbles cannot be tamed
to the end they will look at us
with a calm and very clear eye

A Naked Town
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

On the plain that town flat like an iron sheet
with mutilated hand of its cathedral a pointing claw
with pavements the colour of intestines houses stripped
of their skin

the town beneath a yellow wave of sun
a chalky wave of moon

o town what a town tell me what's the name of that town
under what star on what road

about people: they work at the slaughter-house in an immense building
of raw concrete blocks around them the odour of blood
and the penitential psalm of animals Are there poets there
(silent poets)
there are troops a big rattle of barracks on the outskirts
on Sunday beyond the bridge in prickly bushes on cold
sand on rusty grass girls receive soldiers
there are as well some places dedicated to dreams The cinema
with a white wall on which splash the shadows of the absent
little halls where alcohol is poured into glass thin and thick
there are also dogs at last hungry dogs that howl
and in that fashion indicate the borders of the town Amen

so you still ask what's the name of that town
which deserves biting anger where is that town
on the cords of what winds beneath what column of air
and who lives there people with the same skin as ours
or people with our faces or

The Fathers of a Star
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Clocks were running as usual so they waited only
for the avalanche effect and whether it would follow
the curve traced on a sheet of ether
they were calm and certain on the tower of their calculations
amid gentle volcanoes under the guard of lead
they were covered by glass and silence and a sky without secrets
clocks were running as usual so the explosion came

with their hats pulled tightly over their brows they walked away
smaller than their clothes the fathers of a star
they thought about a kite from childhood the tense
string trembled in their hands
and now everything was separated from them
clocks worked for them they were left only
like an heirloom from father an old silver pulse

in the evening in a house near a forest without animals or ferns
with a concrete path and an electric owl

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they will read the tale of Daedalus to their children
the Greek was right he didn't want the moon or the stars
he was only a bird he remained in the order of nature
and the things he created followed him like animals
like a cloak he wore on his shoulders his wings and his fate

Elegy of Fortinbras
For C.M.
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Now that we're alone we can talk prince man to man
though you lie on the stairs and see no more than a dead ant
nothing but black sun with broken rays
I could never think of your hands without smiling
and now that they lie on the stone like fallen nests
they are as defenceless as before the end is exactly this
The hands lie apart The sword lies apart The head apart
and the knight's feet in soft slippers

You will have a soldier's funeral without having been a soldier
the only ritual I am acquainted with a little
There will be no candles no singing only cannon-fuses and bursts
crepe dragged on the pavement helmets boots artillery
horses drums drums I know nothing exquisite
those will be my manoeuvres before I start to rule
one has to take the city by the neck and shake it a bit

Anyhow you had to perish Hamlet you were not for life
you believed in crystal notions not in human clay
always twitching as if asleep you hunted chimeras
wolfishly you crunched the air only to vomit
you knew no human thing you did not know even how
to breathe

Now you have peace Hamlet you accomplished what you had to
and you have peace The rest is not silence but belongs to me
you chose the easier part an elegant thrust
but what is heroic death compared with eternal watching
with a cold apple in one's hand on a narrow chair
with a view of the ant-hill and the clock's dial

Adieu prince I have tasks a sewer project
and a decree on prostitutes and beggars
I must also elaborate a better system of prisons

since as you justly said Denmark is a prison
I go to my affairs This night is born
A star named Hamlet We shall never meet
What I shall leave will not be worth a tragedy

It is not for us to greet each other or bid farewell we live
On archipelagos
And that water these words what can they do what can
They do prince

The Return of the Proconsul
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

I've decided to return to the emperor's court
once more I shall see if it's possible to live there
I could stay here in this remote province
under the full sweet leaves of the sycamore
and the gentle rule of sickly nepotists

when I return I don't intend to commend myself
I shall applaud in measured portions
smile in ounces frown discreetly
for that they will not give me a golden chain
this iron one will suffice

I've decided to return tomorrow or the day after
I cannot live among vineyards nothing here is mine
trees have no roots houses no foundations the rain is
glassy flowers smell of wax
a dry cloud rattles against the empty sky
so I shall return tomorrow or the day after in any case
I shall return

I must come to terms with my face again
with my lower lip so it knows how to curb scorn
with my eyes so they remain ideally empty
and with that miserable chin the hare of my face
which trembles when the chief of guards walks in

of one thing I am sure I will not drink with him
when he brings his goblet nearer I will lower my eyes
and pretend I'm picking bits of food from between my teeth
besides the emperor likes courage of convictions
to a certain extent to a certain reasonable extent

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he is after all a man like everyone else
and already tired by all those tricks with poison
he cannot drink his fill incessant chess
this left cup is for Drusus from the right one pretend to sip

then drink only water never lose sight of Tacitus
take a walk in a garden and return when the corpse has
been removed

I've decided to return to the emperor's court
Yes I hope that things will work out somehow

A Halt
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czesław Miłosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

We halted in a town the host
ordered the table to be moved to the garden the first star
shone out and faded we were breaking bread
crickets were heard in the evening weeds
a cry but a cry of a child otherwise the bustle
of insects of men a thick scent of earth
those who were sitting with their backs to the wall
saw the gallows hill now a violet hill
on the wall the dense ivy of executions

we were eating a lot
as is usual when no one must pay

Two Drops
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott
[from *Selected Poems, by Zbigniew Herbert*, trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott, the Ecco Press, Hopewell, NJ, 1968.]

No time to grieve for roses, when the forests are burning--Slowacki

The forests were on fire--
they however
wreathed their necks with their hands
like bouquets of roses

People ran to the shelters--
he said his wife had hair
in whose depths one could hide

Covered by one blanket
they whispered shameless words
the litany of those who love

When it got very bad
they leapt into each other's eyes
and shut them firmly

So firmly they did not feel the flames
when they came up to the eyelashes

To the end they were brave
To the end they were faithful
To the end they were similar
like two drops
stuck at the edge of a face

A Tale

by Zbigniew Herbert

trans. by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott

[from *Selected Poems, by Zbigniew Herbert*, trans. by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott, the Ecco Press, Hopewell, NJ, 1968]

The poet imitates the voices of birds
he cranes his long neck
his protruding Adam's apple
is like a clumsy finger on a wing of melody

when singing he deeply believes
that he advances the sunrise
the warmth of his song depends on this
as does the purity of his high notes

the poet imitates the sleep of stones
his head withdrawn into his shoulders
he is like a piece of sculpture
breathing rarely and painfully

when asleep he believes that he alone
will penetrate the mystery of existence
and take without the help of theologians
eternity into his avid mouth

what would the world be
were it not filled with
the incessant bustling of the poet

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

among the birds and stones

Mr. Cogito's Soul
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
trans. by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter
[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

In the past
we know from history
she would go out form the body
when the heart stopped

with the last breath
she went quietly away
to the blue meadows of heaven

Mr. Cogito's soul
acts differently

during his life she leaves his body
without a word of farewell

for months for years she lives
on different continents
beyond the frontiers
of Mr. Cogito

it is hard to locate her address
she sends no news of herself
avoids contacts
doesn't write letters

no one knows when she will return
perhaps she has left forever

Mr. Cogito struggles to overcome
the base feeling of jealousy

He thinks well of his soul
thinks of her with tenderness

undoubtedly she must live also
in the bodies of others
certainly there are too few souls

for all humanity

Mr. Cogito accepts his fate
he has no other way out

He even attempts to say
--my own soul mine

he thinks of his soul affectionately
he thinks of his soul with tenderness

therefore when she appears
unexpectedly
he doesn't welcome her with the words
--it's good you've come back

he only looks at her from an angle
as she sits before the mirror
combing her hair
tangled and gray

Mr. Cogito on Virtue
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
trans. by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter
[from *Spoiling Customhouse's Dirt: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

I

It is not at all strange
she isn't the bride
of real men

of generals
athletes of power
despots

through the ages she follows them
this tearful old maid
in a dreadful hat from the Salvation Army
she reprimands them

she drags out of the junkroom
a portrait of Socrates
a little cross molded from bread
old words

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--while marvelous reverberates all around
ruddy as a slaughterhouse at dawn

she could almost be buried
in a silver casket
of innocent souvenirs

she becomes smaller and smaller
like a hair in the throat
like a buzzing in the ear

2

my god
if she was a little younger
a little prettier

kept up with the spirit of the times
swayed her hips
to the rhythm of popular music

maybe then she would be loved
by real men
generals athletes of power despots

if she took care of herself
looked presentable
like Liz Taylor
or the Goddess of Victory

but an odor of mothballs
wafts from her
she compresses her lips
repeats a great--No

unbearable in her stubbornness
ridiculous as a scarecrow
as the dream of an anarchist
as the lives of the saints

The Divine Claudius
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
trans. by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter
[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

It was said
I was begotten by Nature
but unfinished
like an abandoned sculpture
a sketch
the damaged fragment of a poem

for years I played the half-wit
idiots live more safely
I calmly put up with insults
if I planted all the pits
thrown into my face
an olive grove would spring up
a vast oasis of palms

I received a many-sided education
Livy the rhetoricians philosophers
I spo[illegible] Greek like an Athenian
although Plato I recalled
only in the lying position

I completed my studies
in dockside taverns and brothels
those unwritten dictionaries of vulgar Latin
bottomless treasuries of crime and lust

after the murder of Caligula
I hid behind a curtain
they dragged me out by force
I didn't manage to adopt an intelligent expression
when they threw at my feet the world
ridiculous and flat

from then on I became the most diligent
emperor in universal history
a Hercules of bureaucracy
I recall with pride
my liberal law
giving permission to let out
sounds of the belly during feasts
I deny the charge of cruelty often made against me
in reality I was only absentminded

on the day of Messalina's violent murder--
the poor thing was killed I admit on my orders--

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I asked during the banquet--Why hasn't Madame come
a deathly silence answered me
really I forgot

sometimes it would happen I invited
the dead to a game of dice
I punished failure to attend with a fine
overburdened by so many labors
I might have made mistakes in details

it seems
I ordered thirty-five senators
and the cavalrymen of some three centurions
to be executed
well what of it
a bit less purple
fewer gold rings
on the other hand--and this isn't a trifle--
more room in the theater

no one wanted to understand
that the goal of these operations was sublime
I longed to make death familiar to people
to dull its edge
bring it down to the banal everyday dimension
of a slight depression or runny nose

and here is the proof
of my delicacy of feeling
I removed the statue of gentle Augustus
from the square of executions
so the sensitive marble
wouldn't hear the roars of the condemned

my nights were devoted to study
I wrote the history of the Etruscans
a history of Carthage
a bagatelle about Saturn
a contribution to the theory of games
and a treatise on the venom of serpents
it was I who saved Ostia
from the invasion of sand
I drained swamps
built aqueducts
since then it has become easier
in Rome to wash away blood

I expanded the frontiers of the empire
by Brittany Mauretania
and if I recall correctly Thrace

my death was caused by my wife Agrippina
and an uncontrollable passion for boletus
mushrooms--the essence of the forest--became the essence of death

descendants--remember with proper respect and honor
at least one merit of the divine Claudius
I added new signs and sounds to our alphabet
expanded the limits of speech that is the limits of freedom

the letters I discovered--beloved daughters--Digamma and Antisigma
led my shadow
as I pursued the path with tottering steps to the dark land of Orkus

The Monster of Mr. Cogito
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
trans. by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter
[from *Sparking Gambol's Flat: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

I

Lucky Saint George
from his knight's saddle
could exactly evaluate
the strength and movements of the dragon

the first principle of strategy
is to assess the enemy accurately

Mr. Cogito
is in a worse position

he sits in the low
saddle of a valley
covered with thick fog

through fog it is impossible to perceive
fiery eyes
greedy claws
jaws

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

through fog
one sees only
the shimmering of nothingness

the monster of Mr. Cogito
has no measurements

it is difficult to describe
escapes definition

it is like an immense depression
spread out over the country

it can't be pierced
with a pen
with an argument
or spear

were it not for its suffocating weight
and the death it sends down
one would think
it is the hallucination
of a sick imagination

but it exists
for certain it exists

like carbon monoxide it fills
houses temples markets

poisons wells
destroys the structures of the mind
covers bread with mold

the proof of the existence of the monster
is its victims

it is not direct proof
but sufficient

2

reasonable people say
we can live together
with the monster

we only have to avoid

sudden movements
sudden speech

if there is a threat
assume the form
of a rock or a leaf

listen to wise Nature
recommending mimicry

that we breathe shallowly
pretend we aren't there

Mr Cogito however
does not want a life of make-believe

he would like to fight
with the monster
on firm ground

so he walks out at dawn
into a sleepy suburb
carefully equipped
with a long sharp object

he calls to the monster
on the empty streets

he offends the monster
on the empty streets

he offends the monster
provokes the monster

like a bold skirmisher
of an army that doesn't exist

he calls--
come out contemptible coward

through the fog
one sees only
the huge snout of nothingness

Mr Cogito wants to enter
the uneven battle

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

it ought to happen
possibly soon

before there will be
a fall from inertia
an ordinary death without glory
suffocation from formlessness

Damastes (Also Known as Procrustes) Speaks
by Zbigniew Herbert
(1924-1998)
trans. by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter
[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

My movable empire between Athens and Megara
I ruled alone over forests ravines precipices
without the advice of old men foolish insignia with a simple club
dressed only in the shadow of a wolf
and terror caused by the sound of the word Damastes

I lacked subjects that is I had them briefly
they didn't live as long as dawn however it is slander
to say I was a bandit as the falsifiers of history claim

in reality I was a scholar and social reformer
my real passion was anthropometry

I invented a bed with the measurements of a perfect man
I compared the travelers I caught with this bed
it was hard to avoid--I admit--stretching limbs cutting legs
the patients died but the more there were who perished
the more I was certain my research was right
the goal was noble progress demands victims

I longed to abolish the difference between the high and the low
I wanted to give a single form to disgustingly varied humanity
I never stopped in my efforts to make people equal

my life was taken by Theseus the murderer of the innocent Minotaur
the one who went through the labyrinth with a woman's ball of yarn
an impostor full of tricks without principles or a vision of the future

I have the well-grounded hope others will continue my labor
and bring the task so boldly begun to its end

Report from a Besieged City

by Zbigniew Herbert

(1924-1998)

trans. by Czeslaw Milosz

[from *Sparing Landfalls: Fifty Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Too old to carry arms and to fight like others--

they generously assigned to me the inferior role of a chronicler
I record--not knowing for whom--the history of the siege

I have to be precise but I don't know when the invasion began
two hundred years ago in December in autumn perhaps yesterday at dawn
here everybody is losing the sense of time

we were left with the place an attachment to the place
still we keep ruins of temples phantoms of gardens of houses
if we were to lose the ruins we would be left with nothing

I write as I can in the rhythm of unending weeks
monday: storehouses are empty a rat is now a unit of currency
tuesday: the mayor is killed by unknown assailants
wednesday: talks of armistice the enemy interned our envoys
we don't know where they are being kept i.e. tortured
thursday: after a stormy meeting the majority voted down
the motion of spice merchants on unconditional surrender
friday: the onset of plague saturday: the suicide of
N.N., the most steadfast defender sunday: no water we repulsed
the attack at the eastern gate named the Gate of the Alliance

I know all this is monotonous nobody would care

I avoid comments keep emotions under control describe facts
they say facts only are valued on foreign markets
but with a certain pride I wish to convey to the world
thanks to the war we raised a new species of children
our children don't like fairy tales they play killing
day and night they dream of soup bread bones
exactly like dogs and cats

in the evening I like to wander in the confines of the City
along the frontiers of our uncertain freedom
I look from above on the multitude of armies on their lights
I listen to the din of drums to barbaric shrieks

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it's incredible that the City is still resisting

the siege has been long the foes must replace each other
they have nothing in common except a desire to destroy us
the Goths the Tartars the Swedes the Emperor's troupes regiments of
Our Lord's Transfiguration
who could count them
colors of banners change as does the forest on the horizon
from the bird's delicate yellow in the spring through the green the red to the winter black

and so in the evening freed from facts I am able to give thought
to bygone faraway matters for instance to our
allies overseas I know they feel true compassion
they send us flour sacks of comfort lard and good counsel
without even realizing that we were betrayed by their fathers
our former allies from the time of the second Apocalypse
their sons are not guilty they deserve our gratitude so we are grateful
they have never lived through the eternity of a siege
those marked by misfortune are always alone
Dalai Lama's defenders Kurds Afghan montaineers

now as I write these words proponents of compromise
have won a slight advantage over the party of the dauntless
usual shifts of mood our fate is still in the balance

cemeteries grow larger the number of defenders shrinks
but the defense continues and will last to the end
and even if the City falls and one of us survives
he will carry the City inside him on the roads of exile
he will be the City

we look at the face of hunger the face of fire the face of death
and the worst of them all--the face of treason

and only our dreams have not been humiliated

Warsaw, 1952

Mr. Cogito Thinks About Blood
by Zbigniew Herbert

1

Reading a book
on the horizons of science

the history of the progress of thought
from the murk of faith
to the light of knowledge
Mr Cogito came upon an episode
that has darkened
his private horizon
with a cloud

a tiny contribution
to the obese history
of fatal human errors

for a long time
the conviction persisted
man carries in himself
a sizeable reservoir of blood

a squat barrel
twenty-odd litres
- a trifle

from this we can understand
the effusive descriptions of battles
fields red as coral

gushing torrents of gore
a sky that repeats
infamous hecatombs

and also the universal
method of cure

the artery
of a sick man was opened
and the precious liquid
let lightheartedly out
into a tin basin

not everyone lived through it
Descartes whispered in agony
Messieurs épargnez -

2

now we know exactly
that in the body of each man

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the condemned and the executioner
scarcely flows
four to five litres
of what used to be called
the body's soul

a few bottles of Burgundy
a pitcher
one-fourth
of the capacity of a pail

very little

Mr Cogito
is naïvely astonished
this discovery
did not create a revolution
in the domain of customs

at least it should incline
people to reasonable thrift

we may not
wastefully squander as before
on battlefields
on places of execution

really there isn't much of it
less than water oil
resources of energy

but it happened otherwise
shameful conclusions were drawn

instead of restraint
wastefulness

the precise measurement
strengthened nihilists
gave a greater impetus to tyrants
now they know exactly
that man is fragile
and it is easy to drain him of blood

four to five litres
an amount without significance

therefore the triumph of science
did not bring substance for thought
a principle of behaviour
a moral norm

it is small consolation
thinks Mr Cogito
that the exertions of scientists
have not changed the course of affairs

they hardly weigh as much
as the sigh of a poet

and the blood
continues to flow

goes beyond the horizons of the body
the limits of fantasy
- probably there will be a deluge

Voice
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Czeslaw Milosz

I walk on the sea-shore
to catch the voice
between the braking of one wave
and another

but there is no voice
only the senile garrulity of water
salty nothing
a white bird's wing
stuck dry to a stone

I walk to the forest
where persists the continuous
hum of an immense hour-glass
sifting leaves into humus
humus into leaves
powerful jaws of insects
consume the silence of the earth

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I walk into the fields
green and yellow sheets

fastened with pins of insect beings
sing at every touch of the wind

where is that voice
it should speak up
when for a moment there is a pause
in the unrelenting monologue of the earth

nothing but whispers
clappings explosions

I come home
and my experience takes on
the shape of an alternative
either the world is dumb
or I am deaf

but perhaps
we are both
doomed to our afflictions

therefore we must
arm in arm
go blindly on
towards new horizons
towards contracted throats
from which rises
an unintelligible gurgle

From the Top of the Stairs
by Zbigniew Herbert - 1956
trans. by John & Bogdana Carpenter

Of course
those who are standing at the top of the stairs
know
they know everything

with us it's different
sweepers of squares
hostages of a better future
those at the top of the stairs
appear to us rarely
with a hushing finger always at the mouth

we are patient

our wives darn the sunday shirts
we talk of food rations
soccer prices of shoes
while on saturday we tilt the head backward
and drink

we aren't those
who clench their fists
brandish chains
talk and ask questions
in a fever of excitement
urging to rebel
incessantly talking and asking questions

here is their fairy tale -
we will dash at the stairs
and capture them by storm
the heads of those who were standing at the top
will roll down the stairs
and at last we will gaze
at what can be seen from those heights
what future
what emptiness

we don't desire the view
of rolling heads
we know how easily heads grow back
and at the top there will always remain
one or three
while at the bottom it is black from brooms and shovels

sometimes we dream
those at the top of the stairs
come down
that is to us
and as we are chewing bread over the newspaper
they say

- now let's talk
man to man
what the posters shout out isn't true
we carry the truth in tightly locked lips
it is cruel and much too heavy
so we bear the burden by ourselves
we aren't happy
we would gladly stay
here

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these are dreams of course
they can come true
or not come true
so we will
continue to cultivate
our square of dirt
square of stone

with a light head
a cigarette behind the ear
and not a drop of hope in the heart

17 September
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by John & Bogdana Carpenter

For Józef Chapski

My defenseless country will admit you invader
where Jas and little Mary went walking to school
the path won't be split into an abyss

Rivers are too lazy not quick to flood
knights sleeping in the mountains continue to sleep
so you will enter easily uninvited guest

But sons of the earth will gather at night
funny carbonari plotters of freedom
they will clean old-fashioned weapons
will swear on a bird on two colours

And then as always - glows and explosions
boys like children sleepless commanders
knapsacks filled with defeat crimson fields of glory
the strengthening knowledge - we are alone

My defenseless country will admit you invader
and give you a plot of earth under a willow - and peace
so those who come after us will learn again
the most difficult art - the forgiveness of sins

Study of the Object
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Czeslaw Milosz

I

The most beautiful is the object
which does not exist

it does not serve to carry water
or to preserve the ashes of a hero

it was not cradled by Antigone
nor was a rat drowned in it

it has no hole
and is entirely open

seen
from every side
which means
hardly anticipated

the hairs
of all its lines
join
in one stream of light

neither
blindness
nor death
can take away the object
which does not exist

2

mark the place
where stood the object
which does not exist
with a black square
it will be
a simple dirge
for the beautiful absence

manly regret
imprisoned
in a quadrangle

3

now
all space
swells like an ocean

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

a hurricane beats
on the black sail

the wings of blizzard circles
over the black square

and the island sinks
beneath the salty increase

4

now you have
empty space
more beautiful then the object

more beautiful than the place it leaves
it is the pre-world
a white paradise
of all possibilities
you may enter there
cry out
vertical-horizontal

perpendicular lightning
strikes the naked horizon

we can stop at that
anyway you have already created a world

5

obey the counsels
of the inner eye

do not yield
to murmurs mutterings smackings

it is the uncreated world
crowding before the gates of your canvas

angels are offering
the rosy wadding of clouds

trees are inserting everywhere
slovenly green hair

kings are praising purple
and commanding their trumpeters

to gild

even the whale asks for a portrait

obey the counsel of the inner eye
admit no one

6

extract
from the shadow of the object
which does not exist
from polar space
from the stern reveries of the inner eye
a chair

beautiful and useless
like a cathedral in the wilderness

place on the chair
a crumpled tablecloth
add to the idea of order
the idea of adventure

let it be a confession of faith
before the vertical struggling with the horizontal

let it be
quieter than angels
prouder than kings
more substantial than a whale
let it have the face of the last things

we ask reveal o chair
the depths of the inner eye
the iris of necessity
the pupil of death

Naked Town
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Czeslaw Milosz

On the plain that town flat like an iron sheet
with mutilated hands of its cathedral a pointing claw
with pavements the colour of intestines houses stripped of the skin
the town beneath a yellow wave of sun
a chalky wave of moon

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o town what a town tell me what's the name of that town
under what star on what road

about people: they work at the slaughter-house in an immense building
of raw concrete blocks around them the odour of blood
and the penitential psalm of animals Are there poets there (silent poets)
there are troops a big rattle of barracks on the outskirts
on Sunday beyond the bridge in prickly bushes on cold sand
on rusty grass girls receive soldiers
there are as well places dedicated to dreams The cinema
with a white wall on which splash the shadows of the absent
little halls where alcohol is poured into glass thin and thick
there are also dogs at last hungry dogs that howl
and in that fashion indicate the borders of the town Amen

so you still ask what's the name of that town
which deserves biting anger where is that town
on the cords of what winds beneath what column of air
and who lives there people with the same skin as ours
or people with our faces or

From the Technology of Tears
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Peter Dale Scott

In our present state of knowledge only false tears are suitable for treatment and regular production. Genuine tears are hot, for which reason it is very difficult to remove them from the face. After their reduction to a solid state, they have proved to be extremely fragile. The problems of commercially exploiting genuine tears is a real headache for technologists.
False tears before being quick-frozen are submitted to a process of distillation, since they are by nature impure, and they are reduced to a state in which, with respect to purity, they are hardly inferior to genuine tears. They are very hard, very durable and thus are suitable not only for ornamentation but also for cutting glass.

Elephant
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Peter Dale Scott

As a matter of fact elephants are very sensitive and nervous. They have a prolific imagination, which allows them now and then to forget about their appearance. when they come down into water, they close their eyes. At the sight of their own legs they are overcome with agitation and weep.
I myself knew an elephant who fell in love with a hummingbird. He lost weight, did not

sleep, and finally died of a heart attack. Those who do not know about the nature of elephants have been saying he was so slobbish.

Emperor
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Czesław Miłosz

Once upon a time there was an Emperor. He had yellow eyes and predatory jaw. He lived in a palace full of statuary and policemen, alone. At night he would wake up and scream. Nobody loved him. Most of all he liked hunting game and terror. But he posed for photographs with children and flowers. When he died, nobody dared to remove his portraits. Take a look, perhaps you still have his mask at home.

The Wind and the Rose
by Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by Peter Dale Scott

Once in a garden there grew a rose. A wind fell in love with her. They were completely different, he - light and fair, she - immobile and heavy as blood.
There came a man in wooden clogs and with his thick hands he plucked the rose. the wind leapt after him, but the man slammed the door in his face.
- O that I might turn to stone - wept the unlucky one - I was able to go round the whole world, I was able to stay away for years at a time, but I knew that she was always there waiting.
The wind understood that, in order really to suffer, one has to be faithful.

Bogdan Czaykowski

A Prayer
by Bogdan Czaykowski
(born 1932)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czesław Miłosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Throw me into a cloud o lord

but do not make me a drop of rain
I do not want to return to earth

throw me into a flower o lord

but do not make me a bee
I would die from an excess of industrious sweetness

throw me into a lake

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but do not make me a fish o lord
I would not be able to become cold-blooded

throw me into a forest
like a pine cone on the grass
let no red-haired squirrels find me

throw me into a calm shape of a stone
but not on the pavement of a London street
o lord I worry and bite walls in this alien city

you who turn me over fire
pluck me from flames
and deposit me on a quiet white cloud

A Revolt in Verse
by Bogdan Czaykowski
(born 1932)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

I was born there.
I did not choose the place.
Why was I not born simply in the grass.
Grass grows everywhere.
Only deserts would not accept me.
Or I could have been born in a skein of the wind
When the air is breathing.
But I was born there.
They chained me when I was a baby
And they put me into the world with my little chains.
I am here. I was born there.
Had I at least been born at sea.
You, magnetic iron
Which turn me constantly towards a pole,
You are heavy; without you I am so light
That I lose the perception of my weight.
So I bear those little chains
And I toss them as a lion tosses his mane.
People from over there shout:
Come back.
They call me: chip, chip, chip
Millet and weeds are poured in vain.
Dog, into the kennel!
I am a poet (one has to have a name)
The language is my chain.

Words are my collar.
I was born there.
Why was I not born simply in the grass.

Stanisław Barańczak

Never Really

by Stanisław Barańczak

trans. by Magnus Jan Krynski and Robert A. Maguire
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

I never really felt the cold, never
was devoured by lice, never knew
true hunger, humiliation, fear for my life.

at times I wonder whether I have any right to write

Those Men, So Powerful

by Stanisław Barańczak

trans. by Magnus Jan Krynski and Robert A. Maguire
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Those men, so powerful, always shown
somewhat from below by crouching cameramen, who lift
a heavy foot to crush me, no, to climb
the steps of the plane, who raise a hand
to strike me, no, to greet the crowds
obediently waving little flags, those men who sign
my death warrant, no, just a trade
agreement which is promptly dried by a servile blotter,

those men so brave, with upraised foreheads
standing in an open car, who
so courageously visit the battleline of harvest operations,
step into a furrow as though entering a trench,
those men with hard hands capable of banging
the rostrum and slapping the backs
of people bowed in obeisance who have just this
moment been pinned
to their best suits with a medal,

always
you were so afraid of them,
you were so small

compared to them, who always stood above
you, on steps, rostrums, platforms,
and yet it is enough for just one instant to stop
being afraid a little less,
to become convinced that they are the ones,
that they are the ones who are most afraid.

If Porcelain, Then Only the Kind

by Stanisław Barańczak

trans. by Frank Kujawinski

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czesław Miłosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

If porcelain, then only the kind
you won't miss under the shoe of a mover or the thread of a tank;
if a chair, then one not too comfortable, lest
there be regret in getting up and leaving;
if clothing, then just so much as can fit in a suitcase,
if books, then those which can be carried in the memory,
if plans, then those which can be overlooked
when the time comes for the next move
to another street, continent, historical period
or world.

who told you that you were permitted to settle in?
who told you that this or that would last forever?
Did no one ever tell you that you will never
In the world
Feel at home in the world.

Anna Swirszczyńska

They Lay Dying Side by Side

by Anna Swirszczyńska

(1909-1984)

trans. by Magnus F. Krynski & Robert A. Maguire

[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

'Your husband's lying here in the next bed.'
'Your wife's lying here next to you.'
They lay dying side by side,
each muffled up in his own suffering,
not looking at the other.

They grappled with death,
sweat pouring, teeth gnashing.

At dawn
the husband looked toward the window.
'Will I live to see the day?' he asked.

They died side by side,
without so much as a glance at each other.

We Are Going to Shoot at the Heart

Anna Swirszczyńska

(1909-1984)

trans. by Czesław Miłosz & Leonard Nathan

[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

We will kill our love.

We will kill our love.

We will strangle it
as one strangles a baby.
We will kick it
as one kicks a faithful dog.

We will tear out
its live wings
as one does it
to a bird.

We will shoot it in the heart
as one shoots oneself.

Jerzy Ficowski

The Seven Words

by Jerzy Ficowski

(born 1924)

trans. by Keith Bosley and Krystyna Wandycz

[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

'Mummy! But I've been good! It's dark!'--words of a child being shut in a gas chamber at Bel ec in 1942, according to the statement of the only surviving prisoner; quoted in Rudolf Reder, Bel ec (1946)

Everything was put to use
everyone perished but nothing was lost
a mound of hair fallen from heads
for a hamburg mattress factory
gold teeth pulled out
under the anaesthetic of death

Everything was put to use
a use was found even for that voice
smuggled this far in the bottom of another's memory
like lime unslaked with tears

and bel ec opens sometimes right to the bone
and everlasting darkness bursts from it
how to contain it

and the protest of a child who was who was
though memory pales
not from horror
this is how it has paled for thirty years

And silences by the million are silent
transformed into a seven-figure sign
And once vacant place is calling calling

Who are not afraid of me
for I am small and not here at all
do not deny me
give me back the memory of me
these post-human words
just these seven words

Ex-Jewish Things
by Jerzy Ficowski
(born 1924)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

She's got a wardrobe from which
the dresses managed to escape
they would have gone out of style anyway
\

an armchair from which
somebody once got up
just for a moment
that lasted the rest of his life

pots and pans full of hunger
but handy when
you want to eat your fill

portrait of a murdered girl
in living color

she could also have gotten a black table
good condition
but she didn't like its looks

sad somehow

János Pilinsky

The French Prisoner
by János Pilinsky
(1921-1981)
trans. by János Csokits and Ted Hughes
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

If only I could forget that Frenchman.
I saw him, a little before dawn, creeping past our hut
into the dense growth of the back garden
so that he almost merged into the ground.
As I watched he looked back, he peered all round--
at last he had found a safe hideout.
Now his plunder can be all his!
Whatever happens, he'll go no further.

And already he is eating, biting into the turnip
which he must have smuggled out under his rags.
He was gulping raw cattle-turnip!
Yet he had hardly swallowed one mouthful
before it vomited back up.
Then the sweet pulp in his mouth mingled
with joy and revulsion the same
as the happy and unhappy are coupled
in their bodies' ravenous ecstasy.

Only to forget that body, those convulsed shoulder blades,
the hands shrunk to bone,
the bare palm that crammed at his mouth, and clung there
so that it ate, too.
And the shame, desperate, furious,
of the organs savaging each other,
forced to tear from each other
their last shreds of kinship.

The way his clumsy feet had been left out
of the gibbering, bestial elation--
and splayed there, squashed beneath
the torture and rapture of his body.
And his glance--if only I could forget that!
Though he was choking, he kept on
forcing more down his gullet--no matter what--
only to eat--anything--this--that--even himself!

Why go on. Guards came for him.
He had escaped from the nearby prison camp.
And just as I did then, in that garden,
I am strolling here, among garden shadows, at home.
I look into my notes and quote:
'If only I could forget that
Frenchman....'
And from my ears, from my eyes, my mouth
the scorching memory roars at me:

'I am hungry!' And suddenly I feel
the everlasting hunger
that poor creature has long since forgotten
and which no earthly nourishment can lessen.
He lives on me. And more and more hungrily!
And I am less and less sufficient for him.
And now he, who would have eaten anything,
is yelling for my heart.

Frankfurt
by János Pilinsky
(1921-1981)
trans. by János Csokits and Ted Hughes
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

In the river bank, an empty sandpit--

all that summer we took the refuse there.
Gliding between villas and gardens
we came to a bridge. Then a dip of the road
and the wooden fence of the racetrack.
A few jolts, and the truck began to slow down.
But even before the brakes could tighten
the first surge of hunger overwhelmed us.

Among the spilling buckets and the bursting sacks--
horror of the spines, bent into position!
Then among those toppled crates began
the pitiless pre-censorship,
interrogating the gristles of the offal.
And there, on all fours, hunger
could not stomach its own fury,
but revolted and surrendered.

They were lost in the dust and filth.
The whole truck shook, howling.
The swill clogged their hearts.
It swamped their consciousness.
They burrowed into the depths of the filled bins
till mouths and eyes were caked.
They drowned in that living sludge
and there, upside down, they were resurrected.

And brought back, scrap by scrap,
what had been utterly lost with them,
wringing their salvation, drunkenly,
out of the gouged mush--
but before their joy could be consummated
the poison of understanding stirred.
First, only the bitterness in their mouths,
then their hearts tasted the full misery.

Abruptly, they backed from the crush. Almost sober
they watched how this drunkenness--
betraying their despair--
possessed their whole being.
But then again, reckless, they abandoned themselves,
now merely enduring, till their organs,
sating themselves, should have completed
the last mistakes of pleasure.

Only to get away--no matter where!
Only to get out, now!

The glowing pack drove us from them
without a flash! They did not even touch us.
All around--the blank walls of the pit.
Only to get home! Probably a steamer
went past quite close by on the river below
and its smoke and soot screened perfectly

the steep, crooked exit. Out across the field!
Bounding eagerly over the mounds
on to the flaming concrete. Then the villas!
The green world streaming back!
The wooden fence of the racecourse.
And after the volley of gaps between the palings
the hot scent, swooning from the gardens!
Then all at once--the shock of loneliness!

In a moment the splendour of the foliage burned out--
its flame hung darkly to the road.
And our faces, and our hands, darkened.
And with us, the paradise.
While behind us between the jouncing cans
and the tattered dusty trees emerged the crepuscular city
of Frankfort--1945.

Fable

by János Pilinsky

(1921-1981)

trans. by János Csokits and Ted Hughes

[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

(Detail from *KZ--Oratorio: Dark Heaven*)

Once upon a time
there was a lonely wolf
lonelier than the angels

He happened to come to a village.
He fell in love with the first house he saw.

Already he loved its walls
the caresses of its bricklayers.
But the window stopped him.

In the room sat people.
Apart from God nobody ever

found them so beautiful
as this child-like beast.

So at night he went into the house.
He stopped in the middle of the room
and never moved from there any more.

He stood all through the night, with wide eyes
and on into the morning when he was beaten to death.

Extract from a Diary
by János Pilinsky
(1921-1981)
trans. by Peter Jay
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

What day is it today? The way I live,
I keep on confusing
time's timetable.
'Like thieves'--in Simone Weil's wonderful words--
'on the cross of space and time
we human beings are nailed.'
I drift off, and the splinters shock me awake.
At such times I see the world with piercing sharpness,
and try to turn my head in your direction.

One Fine Day
by János Pilinsky
(1921-1981)
trans. by Peter Jay
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

Always I have searched for the mislaid tin spoon,
the bric-a-brac landscapes of wretchedness,
hoping that one find day
tears overcome me, and I'm gently taken back by our home's old yard,
its ivy silence, whisper.

Always,
always I have longed for home.

The Hangman's Room
by János Pilinsky

(1921-1981)
trans. by Peter Jay
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

Bacon-smell. Geranium-smell.
The sea can never be seen
from the window of the hangman's room.
The sea is God's,
and the window is closed.

How different is the scent of the scaffold,
and the lamb, when they come for it.

Scaffold in Winter
by János Pilinsky
(1921-1981)
trans. by Peter Jay
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

The one being led? I don't know.
The ones leading? I don't know.
Slaughterhouse or scaffold? I don't know
Who's killing who? Man killing beast
or beast man? I don't know.
And plunging, the unmistakable,
and the silence after? I don't know.
And the snow, the winter snow? Perhaps
the exiled sea, God's muteness.

Scaffold in winter. There is nothing we know.

Adam Ważyk

The Loop
by Adam Ważyk
(1905-1982)
[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

On a frozen snowless January evening how awful
to get off the bus where it turns back from its last deserted stop
At the far end of the avenue dear Undine

with pale eyes and wide dry lips
you hunch and huddle in your sheepskin coat
You walk between the wooden huts and the housing projects
where it's frightening to hear footsteps or smell smoke
Here fires flare up quickly and aren't easy to put out
a frame shack flames up like a pagan pyre
out there somewhere someone's dancing, someone's singing, someone talks to God
but very far away while you scared stiff
count beneath your breath the bare familiar chestnut trees
clutch the tear-gas pistol in your pocket
and over gravel that squeaks like a tiny animal
run your hair streaming to your home

Jan Twardowski

The World
by Jan Twardowski
(born 1915)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

God hid himself so that the world could be seen
if he'd made himself known there would only be him
and who in his presence would notice the ant
the handsome, peevish wasp worrying in circles
the green drake with his yellow legs
the peewit laying its four eggs crosswise
the dragonfly's round eyes beans in the pod
our mother at the table holding not so long ago
a mug by its big funny ear
the fir tree shedding husks instead of cones
pain and delight both ways to learn
equally mysteries but never the same
stones which show travelers the way

love that is invisible
hides nothing

Hungry
by Jan Twardowski
(born 1915)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

My god is hungry

he's just a bag of bones
he's got no money
no lofty silver domes

Candles can't help him
hymns give him no rest
doctors have no cure
for his thin hollow chest

Governments patrols police
are powerless
love is the only food
his lips will bless

Asking for Faith
by Jan Twardowski
(born 1915)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

I'm knocking at heaven
and asking for faith
but not the makeshift kind
that counts the stars but doesn't notice chickens
not the butterfly kind that lasts a day
I want
the kind that's always fresh because it's boundless
that follows its mother like a lamb
that doesn't grasp but understands
that picks the smallest words
can't answer everything
and doesn't come undone
if someone croaks

Anna Kamieńska

Funny
by Anna Kamieńska
(1920-1986)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

What's it like to be human
the bird asked

I myself don't know
it's being held prisoner by your skin
while reaching infinity
being a captive of your scrap of time
while touching eternity
being hopelessly uncertain
and helplessly hopeful
being a needle of frost
and a handful of heat
breathing in the air
and choking wordlessly
it's being on fire
with a nest made of ashes
eating bread
while filling up on hunger
it's dying without love
it's loving through death

That's funny said the bird
and flew effortlessly up into the air

A Prayer That Will Be Answered

by Anna Kamieńska

(1920-1986)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Lord let me suffer much
and then die

Let me walk through silence
and leave nothing behind not even fear

Make the world continue
let the ocean kiss the sand just as before

Let the grass stay green
so that the frogs can hide in it

so that someone can bury his face in it
and sob out his love

Make the day rise brightly
as if there were no more pain

And let my poem stand clear as a windowpane
bumped by a bumblebee's head

Artur Międzyrzecki

The War of Nerves

by Artur Międzyrzecki

(born 1922)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

The war of nerves is a natural phenomenon
Dogs wage it with cats, bears with bees
The pine moth with the forester, the bookworm with the bookseller
the skunk and the boa with the rabbit

Gentle persuasion won't help much here
there's no point dreaming about taking some time off
Since what kind of break will the mountain eagle get
When he's being shot at from a copter

But the nightingale still sings in spite of danger
The soaring eagle holds sway in the spring sky
The swallow flits by, the swift flutters its wings
The woodpecker, gaudy drummer, won't give up its morning scores

In the war of nerves the less-nervous one wins
the one who doesn't borrow trouble and understands
That the skunk won't shake off its skunky nature
And that you've got to keep your inner balance.

They

by Artur Międzyrzecki

(born 1922)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Don't think it's your character they don't like
Your weakness, your terrific disposition
Don't think that they don't like your critical mind
Or your unwavering faith
Or the sky-high flight of your unruly soul
Or that you're a slave to love

It's time you knew that they don't like all of you
they don't like you as you are nor anything you say or do
And it's not my place to tell you
What a black and venomous hatred this is
And who the killers of God are
And the destroyers of peoples

Someone Else
by Artur Międzyrzecki
(born 1922)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

A tyrant's proclamations (in whatever era)
Are merely words

Someone else must translate them into a manhunt
Someone with a knack
Someone who likes his work

Someone adept at getting the right people
To the right places at the right time
to pound on the door with a crowbar or a fist

Someone who draws up the timetables for raids
As if they were crosswords in the Sunday paper

Someone who doesn't bother with whatever's coming next
It's no longer his affair
He's not responsible
Hell's humble servant
An exemplary employee an adroit technician

Wiktor Woroszlyski

Fascist Nations
by Wiktor Woroszlyski
(born 1927)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Shortly after the war of 1914-1918 the first fascist nations
emerged in Europe In those nations
the sun rose and set at the usual time shedding light

on homestead roofs and hills' green slopes Cattle
mooed gently in cowsheds Mothers kissed
their children's foreheads to wake them at dawn Fathers returning from work
with cheerful weariness in their bones smelled
the smoke from their hearths and after dinner
fell asleep in armchairs or tinkered intrepidly or
practiced their music with passion Children
played at stickball at hopscotch and hide-and-seek Little girls
sprouted breasts and overnight
little girls turned into big girls filled with whisper
and murmur like trees in the woods and sudden giggles the sound of which
made boys' throats go dry On summer evenings
curtains lit from within showed shadows meeting
parting and meeting again tenderly Whereas in winter
lovers inhaled the steam of each other's breath in snowy gardens And
one might also mention cats arching their backs sparrows
soaring up above the pavement old women on their porches flowers cut and potted nurses
taking patients' temperatures people sweeping streets
with brooms One might mention drying
wood wind in a thicket damp furrows in a field And one might also
call to mind many particulars bearing witness that

For there were no signs on the sky mournful comets
burning bushes water turned to blood For
life went on as always Hence there truly were in those nations
many ordinary people and good people and people
who knew nothing and to whom
it never occurred and who
didn't consider themselves accessories and who
had nothing to do with it and who didn't
even read the papers or read them carelessly caught up
in thoughts of what they had to get done
fix the leaking roof get the shoes
repaired propose have
a beer mix the paint light a candle and who
really didn't see the fear in a neighbor's eyes didn't
hear the trembling in travelers' voices asking the way didn't
see the difference didn't hear
an inner voice or if
they had their doubts there was nothing they could do and they took comfort
saying At least we
aren't doing anything wrong we live the way we always did Which was true

And yet these were
fascist nations

Urszula Koziol

A Polish Lesson

by Urszula Koziol
(born 1931)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

To a young man

Between "I know" and "I don't know"
there's a zone of possibilities sown with safe signs
of desperation and perplexity
those safety valves or emergency doors
you force open in case of catastrophe

their curving birdlike back advises you to leave
your *i*'s undotted your *t*'s uncrossed
don't pin the fleeting
butterflies into place

learn to say "I don't know"
learn to say "I can't say" "I don't remember"
learn to say nothing

train your memory to fail
recognize that you have the right to make mistakes
to stay mute

insist that the noise in your ears is due merely
to history's winds or to the changes in pressure
that make mirages out of daily life

We Won't Look Truth in the Eye

by Urszula Koziol
(born 1931)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Truth has no eyes
no face
no tongue

truth is wingless

it doesn't live
beyond the seven seas hills forests

I think that truth
is more like a nagging growth
that gnaws inside

I think it's
that sticky thing
rolled into a ball somewhere under your skin
it hates comfort
it suddenly swells
and sends out desperate signals
dark ones
like a deaf-mute's moving hands

it hurts
it chokes
you can't keep quiet any longer

you scream

Ernest Bryll

Soot
by Ernest Bryll
(born 1935)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

The soot keeps drifting everywhere.
It gives the walls their grayish color.
It's scrubbed each day from off your collar
And combed, like old age , from your hair.

You scrape the blackened windowsill
And paint it bright time and again.
You rub your body raw in vain
And try to bleach the laundry clean

Sometimes a cinder in your lid
Will force an unexpected tear:
The hurt eye, suddenly washed clear,
Sees beauty--or comes close to it...

Leszek A. Moczulski

From *"Ordinary Poems"*
by Leszek A. Moczulski
(born 1938)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

I praise the Singer sewing machine,
the bread it bought, and my father's hands
moving from it to my head on Sunday morning.
Father's forty years drowned in it as if it were a sea,
the forty stubborn years of a man
slowly moving toward
the salt and truth of life.
It bought bread and whatever I needed to live
in holiday bliss.
Father spent his nights
talking and singing with it.
Final truth flows from it.
Final truth flows from it
in the unremitting music
of the people who make objects
to repudiate terror.
It challenged the contempt
bred by a man-made night.
It flashed and passed like the man
who flashed and passed
as he used it to work
toward the world's becoming
in one of a thousand workshops.
It flashed and passed.
An echo. A memory. A grain.
A joy not paid for.
Probably at sunrise on the sea.
I praise the Singer sewing machine--
its needle, shuttle, sheave, and belt--
all final.

Julian Kornhauser

Fundamental Difficulties
by Julian Kornhauser

(born 1946)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

What is a poem a simple thought's cradle
a yellow castle on an unseen hill
a soiled sheet of paper snatched up by the wind
what is a poem memory's rubber stamp
an ordnance map a hurried breath
a senseless moment's glimmer
I really don't know
I don't know if poems are still deathless
if they help you live

Bronisław Maj

Rain Outside a Window

by Bronisław Maj

(born 1953)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Rain outside a window, a glass of tea on the table,
a lamp--this is how, perhaps naively, I see you
in five, in twenty, in a hundred and twenty-five
years reading this poem: thinking of me, a man
of twenty or a hundred and twenty years ago--how
did I live? I and my age: hopelessly tired people,
a few dates, sites of defeat, names: incantations we repeated
then, with the childish hope of the living, lacking
the wisdom which time has given you who lived
after it all--after us, after all of us. There's so little
I can pass on to you, no more than anyone else. But after all
I lived and I don't want to die entirely: to remain
an everyman for you, an object of statistical
pity or disdain.. What was only,
only me is outside the window (it had just rained), the table
pressing my elbows, the clock's tick, the taste of hot
tea, the lamp's light that hurt my eyes
while I wrote this poem--in the universal language of all
five undying
senses.

It Takes Just a Few Minutes

by Bronislaw Maj
(born 1953)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

It takes just a few minutes: the largest market square in old
europe, a hazy morning, the city's voices still uncertain--then:
fire, blinding yellow, shocks and stuns them: in the bank's
doorway the dealing in dollars and vodka stops, the crowd's
trembling circles converge around a man who--having chained himself
to an old pump--is burning. The smell of gas, in a flash:
clothes, then hair, shivering hands and lips: the voice,
deformed by pain, is just a scream, it will never become
a word now, the harsh brown smoke of the cast-off sacrifice
won't rise to the skies, it won't form a sign: it drifts low, disappears
devoured by the crowd's hungry lungs, which--in just a few
minutes--will choose life: in the entrance across the way the dealing
in dollars and vodka resumes, the crowd's calm circles
disperse, the last flame of
old Europe dies out, and the city's triumphant voice
grows strong: *Aflame, you never know if you're becoming*
free. And whatever is yours is
doomed.

March 21, 1980, Krakow

Adam Zagajewski

Electric Elegy
by Adam Zagajewski

trans. by Renata Gorczyiska, Benjamin Ivry, and C.K. Williams
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

Farewell, German radio with your green eye
and your bulky box,
together almost composing
a body and soul. (Your lamps glowed
with a pink, salmony light, like Bergson's
deep self.)
Through the thick fabric
of the speaker (my ear glued to you as
to the lattice of a confessional), Mussolini once whispered,
Hitler shouted, Stalin calmly explained,
Bierut hissed, Gomulka held endlessly forth.
But no one, radio, will accuse you of treason;
no, your only sin was obedience: absolute,

tender faithfulness to the megahertz;
whoever came was welcomed, whoever was sent
was received.
Of course I know only
the songs of Schubert brought you the jade
of true joy. To Chopin's waltzes
your electric heart throbbed delicately
and firmly and the cloth over the speaker
pulsated like the breasts of amorous girls
in old novels.

Not with the news, though,
especially not Radio Free Europe or the BBC.
Then your eye would grow nervous,
the green pupil widen and shrink
as though its atropine dose had been altered.

Mad seagulls lived inside you, and Macbeth.
At night, forlorn signals found shelter
in your rooms, sailors cried out for help,
the young comet cried, losing her head.

Your old age was announced by a cracked voice,
then rattles, coughing, and finally blindness
(your eye faded), and total silence.
Sleep peacefully, German radio,
dream Schumann and don't waken
when the next dictator-rooster crows.

Apes

by Adam Zagajewski

trans. by Renata Gorczyiska, Benjamin Ivry, and C.K. Williams
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

One day apes made their grab for power.
Gold seal-rings,
starched shirts,
aromatic Havanas,
feet squashed into patent leather.
Deeply involved in our other pursuits,
we didn't notice: someone read Aristotle,
someone else was wholly in love.
Rulers' speeches became somewhat more chaotic,
they even gibbered, but still, when
did we ever really listen? Music was better.
Wars: ever more savage; prisons:

stinking worse than before.
Apes, it seems, made their grab for power.

Anthology
by Adam Zagajewski
trans. by Clare Cavanagh
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998]

That evening I was reading an anthology.
Scarlet clouds grazed outside my window.
The spent day fled to a museum.

And you--who are you?
I don't know. I didn't know
if I was born for gladness?
Sorrow? Patient waiting?

In dusk's pure air
I read an anthology.
Ancient poets lived in me, singing.

Dutch Painters
by Adam Zagajewski
trans. by Clare Cavanagh
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998]

Pewter bowls heavy and swelling with metal.
Plump windows bulging from the light.
The palpability of leaden clouds.
Gowns like quilts. Moist oysters.
These things are immortal, but don't serve us.
The clogs walk by themselves.
The floor tiles are never bored,
and sometimes play chess with the moon.
An ugly girl studies a letter
written in invisible ink.
Is it about love or money?
The tablecloths smell of starch and morals.
The surface and depths don't connect.
Mystery? There's no mystery here, just blue sky,
restless and hospitable like a seagull's cry.
A woman neatly peeling a red apple.
Children dream of old age.
Someone reads a book (a book is read),
someone sleeps, becoming a warm object
that breathes like an accordion.

They liked dwelling. They dwelt everywhere,
in a wooden chair back,
in a milky streamlet narrow as the Bering Straits.
Doors were wide open, the wind was friendly.
Brooms rested after work well done.
Homes bared all. The painting of a land
without secret police.
Only on the young Rembrandt's face
an early shadow fell. Why?
Tell us, Dutch painters, what will happen
when the apple is peeled, when the silk dims,
Tell us what darkness is.

Refugees

by Adam Zagajewski

trans. by Clare Cavanagh

[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

Bent under burdens which sometimes
can be seen and sometimes can't,
they trudge through mud or desert sands,
hunched, hungry,

silent men in heavy jackets,
dressed for all four seasons,
old women with crumpled faces,
clutching something--a child, the family
lamp, the last loaf of bread?

It could be Bosnia today,
Poland in September '39, France
eight months later, Thuringia in '45,
Somalia, Afghanistan, Egypt.

There's always a wagon or at least a wheelbarrow
full of treasures (a quilt, a silver cup,
the fading scent of home),
a car out of gas marooned in a ditch,
a horse (soon left behind), snow, a lot of snow,
too much snow, too much sun, too much rain,

and always that special slouch
as if leaning toward another, better planet,
with less ambitious generals,
less snow, less wind, fewer cannons,
less History (alas, there's no

such planet, just that slouch).

Shuffling their feet,
they move slowly, very slowly
toward the country of nowhere,
and the city of no one
on the river of never.

Letter from a Reader
by Adam Zagajewski
trans. by Clare Cavanagh
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

Too much about death,
too much shadows.
Write about life,
an average day,
the yearning for order.

Take the school bell
as your model
of moderation,
even scholarship.

Too much death,
too much
dark radiance.

Take a look,
crowds packed
in cramped stadiums
sing hymns of hatred.

Too much music,
too little harmony, peace,
reason.

Write about those moments
when friendship's footbridges
seem more enduring
than despair.

Write about love,
long evenings,
the dawn,
the trees,

about the endless patience
of the light.

A Quick Poem
by Adam Zagajewski
trans. by Clare Cavanagh
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

I was listening to Gregorian chants
in a speeding car
on a highway in France.
The trees rushed past. Monks' voices
sang praises to an unseen God
(at dawn, in a chapel trembling with cold).
Domine, exaudi orationem meam,
male voices pleaded calmly
as if salvation were just growing in the garden.
Where was I going? Where was the sun hiding?
My life lay tattered
on both sides of the road, brittle as a paper map.
With the sweet monks
I made my way toward the clouds, deep blue,
heavy, dense,
toward the future, the abyss,
gulping heavy tears of hail.
Far from dawn. Far from home.
In place of walls--sheet metal.
Instead of a vigil--a flight.
Travel instead of remembrance.
A quick poem instead of a hymn.
A small, tired star raced
up ahead
and the highway's asphalt shone,
showing where the earth was,
where the horizon's razor lay in wait,
and the black spider of evening
and night, widow of so many dreams.

She Wrote in Darkness
by Adam Zagajewski
trans. by Clare Cavanagh
[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

While living in Stockholm Nelly Sachs
worked at night by a dim lamp,
so as not to waken her sick mother.

She wrote in darkness.
Despair dictated words
heavy as a comet's tail.

She wrote in darkness,
in silence broken only
by the wall clock's sighs.

Even the letters grew drowsy,
their heads drooping on the paper.

Darkness wrote,
having taken this middle-aged woman
for its fountain pen.

Night took pity on her,
morning's gray prison
rose over the city,
rosy-fingered dawn.

While she dozed off
the blackbirds woke
and there was no break
in the sorrow and song.

Three Angels

by Adam Zagajewski

trans. by Clare Cavanagh

[from *Three Angels*, Adam Zagajewski, Wydawnictwo Literakie, Krakow, 1998.]

Suddenly three angels appeared
right here by the bakery on St. George Street.
Not another census bureau survey,
one tired man sighed.
No, the first angel said patiently,
we just wanted to see
what your lives have become,
the flavor of your days and why
your nights are marked by restlessness and fear.

That's right, fear, a lovely, dreamy-eyed
woman replied; but I know why.
The labors of the human mind have faltered.
They need help and support
they can't find. Sir, just take a look

--she called the angel "Sir"!--
At Wittgenstein. Our sages
and leaders are melancholy madmen
and know even less than us
ordinary people (but she wasn't
ordinary).

Then too, said one boy
who was learning to play the violin, evenings
are just an empty carton,
a casket minus mysteries,
while at dawn the cosmos seems as
parched and foreign as a TV screen.
And besides, those who love music for itself
are few and far between.

Others spoke up and their laments
surged into a swelling sonata of wrath.
If you gentlemen want to know the truth,
one tall student yelled--he'd
just lost his mother--we've had enough
of death and cruelty, persecution, disease,
and long spells of boredom still
as a serpent's eye. We've got too little earth
and too much fire. We don't know who we are.
We're lost in the forest, and black stars
move lazily above us as if
they were only our dream.

But still, the second angel mumbled shyly,
there's always a little joy, and even beauty
lies close at hand, beneath the bark
of every hour, in the quiet heart of concentration,
and another person hides in each of us--
universal, strong, invincible.
Wild roses sometimes hold the scent
of childhood, and on holidays young girls
go out walking just as they always have,
and there's something timeless
in the way they wind their scarves.
Memory lives in the ocean, in galloping blood,
in black, burnt stones, in poems,
and in every quiet conversation.
The world is the same as it always was,
full of shadows and anticipation.

He would have gone on talking, but the crowd
was growing larger and waves
of mute rage spread
until at last the envoys rose lightly
into the air, whence, growing distant,
they gently repeated: peace be unto you,
peace to the living, the dead, the unborn.
The third angel alone said nothing,
for that was the angel of long silence.

Ferdous Shahbaz-Adel

Chechenya in My Life
by Ferdous Shahbaz-Adel

When I was little
It was my first day of school
my mother braided my hair
and supplied me with papers and pens
he first picture I drew...
was your picture... Chechenya.

* * *

I was waiting for my father every day
to jump into his arms
"let me touch the ceiling," I begged him
The moment he lifted me on his palm
was a moment mixed with joy, happiness and laughter.
My dream grew, and one day
I begged him, "let me touch the stars"
my father smiled and said: "that I cannot do"
in my childish words I answered: "I will do it."

* * *

I played the Queen of the Caucasus
I played the game of power
with my little neighbors
We ornamented you, Chechenya,
we borrowed the stars from the sky
the flowers on their blooming days
the colors of the butterflies

the laughter of the children
and made you the Eden of the Earth.

* * *

I shared with my grandmother her warm home
and listened with amazement
which gave me more joy than those
of the lion in the jungle
or Peter and the wolf.

* * *

When I first knew the image of God
to the endless power
which makes everything else diminutive
I prayed
neither for health and wisdom
nor for richness and glory
but for the freedom for Chechenya.

* * *

When love touched my heart
neither the storms nor the rain
could stop me from crawling
in the loneliness of the night
and running to you
to throw my head on your shoulder
and whisper in your ear
how much I love you... Chechenya.

* * *

I heard the sad songs of birds
singing in their cages
but my trees were full of birds
singing happily... the song of freedom.

* * *

In the bustle of the day
I opened my bag
it was unlike the bags of other women
full of beauty boxes

but with pieces of my freedom letters
to you... Chechenya.

* * *

I was not born a poetess
but a fountain of words
rushed from my pen
to weave a poem of love to Chechenya.

* * *

Chechenya...
Strangers destroyed you
but your anthem is alive:
"At night the wolf howled
we were born.
In the morning the lion roared
we were given our names.
In the eagle's nest
we were nursed."

* * *

They killed your children
but the mother is alive
who applauds her child
and sings to him:
"Show me the Chechen warrior."
He takes the first step in his life
stands on his toes,
draws the air into his little mouth,
raises his arms like an eagle,
and dances freely like a warrior.

* * *

Chechenya...
Whenever strangers cross you...
and smash you under their feet
you rise again
like a wild flower
growing from the rock
your head high in the sky
and your roots deep in the soil
beauty of dew drops on your face
freedom beating in your veins
and the crown of justice

sparkling on your head.
You are never defeated
even if you are crushed. That is why we are proud of you.

September 25 - October 25, 1995

Tadeusz Różewicz

Lament
1946
by Tadeusz Różewicz
trans. by Marek Englender
[from *The New Polish Poetry: A Bilingual Collection*, ed. by Milne Holton and Paul Vangelisti, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1978.]

I speak to you priests
judges artists and teachers
shoemakers doctors and clerks
and to you my father
hear me out.

I am not young
do not let my body's leanness
deceive you
nor the soft whiteness of my neck
nor the brightness of an open mind
nor the down above my sweet lip
nor my cherubic laughter
nor the spring in my step.

I am not young
do not let my innocence
move you
nor my chasteness
nor my weakness
my fragile simplicity

I am twenty
I am a murderer
I am an instrument
blind as a sword
in the headsman's hand
I have murdered men
and with red fingers
I have stroked the white breasts of women.

Maimed I saw neither
a sky nor a rose
nor a bird a nest a tree
nor Saint Francis
nor Achilles nor Hector
for six years
the vapors of blood have stuck in my nostrils
I do not believe water can change into wine
I do not believe in the forgiveness of sins
I do not believe in the resurrection of the body.

A Sketch for a Modern Love Poem

by Tadeusz Różewicz

(b. 1921)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

And yet whiteness
can be best described by greyness
a bird by a stone
sunflowers
in december

love poems of old
used to be descriptions of flesh
they described this and that
for instance eyelashes

and yet redness
should be described
by greyness the sun by rain
the poppies in november
the lips at night

the most palpable
description of bread
is that of hunger
there is in it
a humid porous core
a warm inside
sunflowers at night
the breasts the belly the thighs of Cybele

a transparent
source-like description

of water
is that of thirst
of ash
of desert
it provokes a mirage
clouds and trees enter
it provokes a mirage
clouds and trees enter
a mirror of water
lack hunger
absence
of flesh
is a description of love
in a modern love poem

The Survivor

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived.

The following are empty synonyms:
man and beast
love and hate
friend and foe
darkness and light.

The way of killing men and beasts is the same
I've seen it:
truckfuls of chopped-up men
who will not be saved.

Ideas are mere words:
virtue and crime
truth and lies
beauty and ugliness
courage and cowardice.

Virtue and crime weigh the same
I've seen it:
in a man who was both
criminal and virtuous.

I seek a teacher and a master
may he restore my sight hearing and speech
may he again name objects and ideas
may he separate darkness from light.

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived.

I See Madmen

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnietwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

I see madmen who
had walked on the sea
believing to the end
and went to the bottom

they still rock
my uncertain boat

cruelly alive I push away
those stiff hands

I push them away year after year.

Chestnut

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnietwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Saddest of all is leaving
home on an autumn morning
when there is no hope of an early return

The chestnut father planted in front
of the house grows in our eyes

mother is tiny
you could carry her in your arms

On the shelf
jars full of preserves
like sweet-lipped goddesses
have retained the flavour

of eternal youth

soldiers at the back of the drawer
will stay leaden till the end of the world

while God almighty who mixed in
bitterness with the sweetness
hangs on the wall helpless
and badly painted

Childhood is like the worn face
on a golden coin that rings
true.

The Return

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Suddenly the window will open
and mother will call
it's time to come in

the wall will part
I will enter heaven in muddy shoes

I will come to the table
and answer questions rudely

I am all right leave me
alone. Head in hand I
sit and sit. How can I tell them
about that long
and tangled way.

Here in heaven mothers
knit green scarves

flies buzz

father dozes by the stove
after six days' labour.

No--surely I can't tell them
that men are at each
other's throats.

What Luck

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

What luck I can pick
berries in the wood
I thought
there is no wood no berries.

What luck I can lie
in the shade of a tree
I thought trees
no longer give shade.

What luck I am with you
my heart beats so
I thought man
has no heart.

Pigtail

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

When all the women in the transport
had their heads shaved
four workmen with brooms made of birch twigs
swept up
and gathered up the hair

Behind clean glass
the stiff hair lies
of those suffocated in gas chambers
there are pins and side combs
in this hair

The hair is not shot through with light
is not parted by the breeze
is not touched by any hand
or rain or lips

In huge chests
clouds of dry hair
of those suffocated

and a faded plait
a pigtail with a ribbon
pulled at school
by naughty boys.

The Museum, Auschwitz, 1948

Massacre of the Boys
by Tadeusz Różewicz
[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnietwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

The children cried 'Mummy!
But I have been good!
It's dark in here! Dark!'

See the small feet
they went to the bottom Do you see
that print
of a small foot here and there

pockets bulging
with string and stones
and little horses made of wire

A great closed plain
like a figure of geometry
and a tree of black smoke
a vertical
dead tree
with no star in its crown.

The Museum, Auschwitz, 1948

Head in a Void
by Tadeusz Różewicz
[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnietwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

If you think you are
a beautiful head
set up
on high

If you think you are
the quick head

of a motionless trunk
which sinks in earth
blood and cow-dung

If you think you circle
upon pure orbits of the intellect
where from below you can hear only
the grunting bustling
and lip-smacking mob

if you think this
you are a head
which sways gently
in depopulated air

you are a head
which will be taken down
and cast aside.

Witness

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

My dear, you know I am in
but don't suddenly enter
my room

You might see me
silent
over a blank sheet

Can you write
about love
when you hear the cries of
the slaughtered and disgraced
can you write
about death
watching the little faces
of children

Do not suddenly
enter my room

You will see
a dumb and bound

witness to love
overcome by death

A Tree

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnietwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Happy were
the poets of old
the world like a tree
they like a child

What shall I hang
upon the branch of a tree
which has suffered
a rain of steel

Happy were
the poets of old
around the tree
they danced like a child

What shall I hang
upon the branch of a tree
which is burnt
and never will sing

Happy were
the poets of old
beneath the oak
they sang like a child

But our tree
creaked in the night
with the weight
of a corpse despised

Unrecorded Epistle

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnietwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

But Jesus stooped
and wrote on the sand
then again he stooped

and wrote with his finger

Mother they are so dim
and simple I have to perform
marvels I do such silly
and futile things
but you understand
and forgive your son
I change water into wine
raise the dead
walk the seas

they are like children
one has always
to show them something new
just imagine

And when they approached
he covered and effaced
the letters
for ever

Proofs

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Death will not correct
a single line of verse
she is no proofreader
she is no sympathetic
lady editor

a bad metaphor is immortal

a shoddy poet who has died
is a shoddy dead poet

a bore bores after death
a fool keeps up his foolish chatter
from beyond the grave

A Tale of Old Women

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

I like old women
ugly women
evil women

they are the salt of the earth

human refuse
does not disgust them

they know the other side
of the coin
of love
and faith

coming and going
dictators clown
their hands stained
with human blood

old women rise at dawn
buy meat fruit bread
clean cook
stand in the street
arms folded silent

old women
are immortal

Hamlet rages in the net
'Faust's role is comic and base
Raskolnikov strikes with his axe

old women are
indestructible
they smile indulgently
a god dies
old women get up as usual
buy fish bread and wine
civilization dies
old women get up at dawn
open windows
and remove the filth
a man dies
they wash the corpse
bury the dead

plant flowers
on graves

I like old women
ugly women
evil women

they believe in life everlasting
they are the salt of the earth
the bark of trees
and the humble eyes of beasts

cowardice and heroism
greatness and pettiness
they perceive in true perspective
scaled to demands
of common day

their sons discover America
perish at Thermopylae
die on crosses
conquer the cosmos

old women go out at dawn
to buy milk bread meat
they season the soup
and open the windows

only fools laugh
at old women
ugly women
evil women

for these are beautiful women
good women
old women
they are the embryo
mystery devoid of mystery
the sphere which rolls

old women
are the mummies
of sacred cats

they are tiny
shriveled

parched
spring's fruit
or plump
oval Buddhas

when they die
a tear
flows from the eye
and joins
the smile
on a young girl's lips

1963

Tree-Felling

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995]

A ceaseless anxiety
reigns among the crowns

a tree scored for felling
with a white mark of annihilation
was still breathing
its boughs and branches
clawing
at the fleeting clouds

the leaves trembled and withered
sensing death

Trees don't move
from place to place
in search of nourishment
they can't escape
the saw
and the axe

a ceaseless anxiety
reigns among the crowns

tree-cutting is an execution
void of ceremony

spitting sawdust

the mechanical saw
enters the bark the pulp and the core
like lightning

struck at its side
it collapsed
and fell into the undergrowth
with its dead weight
it squashed grass and herbs
slender light blades
and trembling gossamer

together with the tree
they destroyed its shade
transparent
ambiguous
image
sign
appearing
in the light
of the sun and moon

The diligent roots
have yet no inkling
of the loss of the trunk
and crown

slowly
the surface death of the tree
reaches below the ground

the roots of neighbouring trees
touch
enter into relationships
and bonds

beside men and beasts
the only living sentient beings
created in the image
and likeness of gods

Trees
cannot hide from us

Children born
painlessly in clinics

maturing in discotheques
torn apart by artificial light
and sound
gaping at TV screens
do not converse
with trees

Trees of childhood cut burnt
poisoned dead
turn green over our heads
in May
shed leaves on graves
in November
grow within us
unto death.

February 1981

Description of a Poem

by Tadeusz Różewicz

[from *Selected Poems*, by Tadeusz Różewicz, "Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

I tried to remember
that ideal
unwritten
poem

nearly ripe
shaped in the night
tangible
it was sinking
and dissolving in the light of day
it did not
exist

at times I felt it
on the tip of the tongue
anxiously
I would sit down pen
in hand
waiting patiently
until convinced
it was an illusion
I would walk away

the poem was probably
a poem about itself
as a pearl
speaks of pearls
and a butterfly of butterflies

it was neither a love-poem
nor an elegy
it neither mourned
nor praised
it neither described
nor judged

that poem
which eludes me in daylight
has hidden itself to itself
only sometimes
I feel its bitterness
and internal warmth
but I don't pull it out of
the dark hollow depth
on to the flat bank
of reality

unborn
it fills the emptiness
of a disintegrating world
with unknown speech

Ewa Lipska

Halloween for the Living
by Ewa Lipska
1974
trans. by Krystyna Kamińska
[from *The New Polish Poetry: A Bilingual Collection*, ed. by Milne Holton and Paul Vangelisti, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1978.]

On this Halloween
The dead descend to the graves of the living
--they switch on neon lights

and they dig through chrysanthemums of aerials
to the roofs of multi-storied tombs
with central heating.

Then
they ride the elevator
down to their everyday work:
to death.

Envoy
by Ewa Lipska
(born 1945)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

To write so that a beggar
would take it for money.

And the dying
would take it for birth.

Questions at a Poetry Reading
by Ewa Lipska
(born 1945)

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Your favorite color?
Your luckiest day?
A poem that lay beyond your grasp?
You don't have any hope?
You frighten us.
Why a black sky
or time shot down?
An empty hand, a hat that floats across the sea?
Why a wedding dress
with a funeral wreath?
Hospital halls
instead of garden paths?
Why not the future? Why the past?
Do you believe? You don't believe?

You frighten us.
We run from you.

I try to restrain them.
They're running into the flames.

Aleksander Jurewicz

Lida

by Aleksander Jurewicz

(1952-)

[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

In memoriam: my father.

I.
I am still five years old and wearing
a sailor's suit
The last repatriation train
is patiently waiting at the station
No one gets onto it
There is no one crying on the platform
Father has got lost somewhere with our Singer
Sewing machine wrapped up in canvas
Mother isn't clutching that picture of the Virgin
Mary of Ostra Brama beneath her arm
The early departing migratory birds are inaudible
silencing as they do the children's squeals of
"I don't want to go to Poland ..."

The station at Lida is empty and sleepy
as if the plague had even reached here
although no general alert was imposed
no bells were rung
no rats ran down the street
September begins to exchange the kopeck
leaves of specific trees
In front of the station is a lorry
from which no one emerges
it does not unload goods
A man and woman with a five-year old son
sit in the lorry transfixed by the distance
which they do not have the strength to cross
as if they were waiting for a twist in their fate
or for a photographer to come along

II.
But here comes the train and the ground
moves from under their feet

The shouting and crying of those who
will remain here forever
and those who must leave
and one long sob
which dissipates in all directions
and the wind carries it on
"Farewell, old country!"
"We won't forget you, old country!"
But suddenly the train sets off hurried on
by an order given in a non-Polish tongue
and head by head
body by body
the sign of the cross made in a sudden impulse
the last glistenings of a town to be forgotten
a Belorussian leaf sticks
to the compartment window
my mother holds the picture of the Virgin tight
my father watches over his Singer machine
in the rhythm of the wheels
in the rhythm of the tears
to the beat of a prayer
to the beat of disillusionment
on to the west!
as if we were being taking away to be shot
off into an uncertain future
from the land of the dispossessed

III.
I never said farewell to that town
I will never get to know my way around it
I constantly wake up on its streets
with scruffed knees with a box
of building blocks in my hands
I am woken by the singing of women on their way
from Sunday vespers
and the swearing of the men in the cherry
orchard drinking some illegally distilled brew

I stood still on the threshold searching for something
and all I can hear is the deaf rumbling of train wheels
That train travels on
It will never stop again

May 1984

Jan Polkowski

You wanted ...
by Jan Polkowski
(1953-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie, pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

You wanted to say too much, you dull words
How ridiculous your conceited hope is that grammar can be a match for death.

But even if I was your hostage
No one cares whether I prove myself faithful, or compromised.

But here I am, alive, and the unsettled surface of the fruits of paradise
Pulsates beneath my finger.
I and my supporters: the black water, the fragile grass, the sweet wind
We distance ourselves in order to reach the source *en m*asse,
from whose letters mere ants cannot drink.

How futile your paper curses are, closely observed
by the breath and fire that
the white rainbow of words does not encompass.

It is Good ...
by Jan Polkowski
(1953-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie, pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

It is good that things occur, that cannot ever last:
a lime tree straining to the last moment to blossom,
a house wishing to continue the male line of the family,
a city determined to maintain at least its foundations beneath the grass.

It is good if there is a fertile root to a country
from which, in a gentler climate, the branches of all the arts can grow.

It is good to feel beneath the ocean's fingertips the sweet and unending
texture of a Ukrainian lullaby intoned by a nanny already assumed into heaven.

It is good, too, if the seven armed fire blazes with dancing Jewish smocks,
the incantation of an Orthodox priest sounds, and a sober German prayer is uttered.

It is good to preserve the graves of eccentric contemporaries, to honour them
on the rippling altars of the air.

It is good to rely on metaphors instead of biographies as a home for the senses
in search of words' frontiers in the language of childhood.

And finally it is good to feel below this sheet of paper a table,
which could have carried the face of God in a boarded-up Slovak church,

it could have taken the form of mountain pastures caught in a trap,
it could have had the expression of the priest who saved Christ,
it could have been hammered together from denunciations, betrayals,
or the countenance of Marx's singed portraits,
with that nobility so deserving of compassion,
this table could have been left behind by German, Jews or Poles
--but it is simply made of wood.

Ryszard Grzyb

Hell
by Ryszard Grzyb
(1956-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

Not in this world will you wipe the tears from your enemy's cheek
Not in this world will you lead a blind dog to a good death
Not in this world will a drop of white reach you in the darkness
Not in this world will joy magnify your heart.

Zbigniew Machej

Let us spare ...
by Zbigniew Machej
(1958-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

Let us spare no pains to know the Lord
Before He comes in the brilliance of the dawn,
He it was who hewed us down through His prophets
And in His passionate fire He did drown us,
And with a single word from His lips He slew us
So that our love for Him would not be like unto the clouds
Or like the dew that vanishes anon.

He it was that smote us, laid us down with his rod of iron
Prepared plagues upon our houses
That the light of His Law might shine forth.
He threw us down, and He will raise us up,

Will bind the wounds that He Himself inflicted.
Before He comes in the brilliance of the dawn,
Let us spare no pains to know the Lord.

Krzysztof Koehler

Kraków

by Krzysztof Koehler
(1963-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

I lifted my eyes and slowly into the space
of my room cluttered with things there entered
a silent, majestic tune from the church tower
as crystal clear as a mountain stream.

Before I could cover my eyes there followed
The accompaniment of loudly clanging bells
And the towers of all the churches hereabouts
Chattered away at that hour of dusk

Until the sounds died out. So only the echo carried
Like the noise of battle brought in from far away, when
The wind blows over to an army waiting to face its fate
Its high spirits and deepest fears, its anger, and its hope ...

Jacek Podsiadło

Don't Leave Me

by Jacek Podsiadło
(1964-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

Don't stop loving me. Not even for a second. Think of me
morning & evening, & when praying. Even at the cost of missing a meal
even if it means you lose more weight. Feel free, watch
'Dempsey & Makepeace', look at the displays of dresses in the shop windows,
the symptoms of any disease
on your body--but just hold me in front of your eyes.

Shifting fifty kilo bags of cement I carry you in my arms.
Skipping to a reggae tune I jump after you into the fire.

Biting my nails I bite them out of longing for you.
Listening to the weather forecast I strain to hear your voice.
Sometimes I'm gasping for air
& then I know you've forgotten about me for a moment.

Grass Accepts
by Jacek Podsiadło
(1964-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

The grass accepts the cigarette ends & brown crawly things
thrown out of the tent.
The earth, the largest orphanage in the universe, patiently tolerates
our childish whims & antics.
Our tears & shooting at each other,
pouring salt into the fruit salad & placing bombs underneath things.
A strong wind blowing, the tent clutches the earth as tightly as a child
hangs onto its Mother's hand. I am writing in a horizontal position, the strength
necessary to understanding this world is rising up through my stomach.
The blades of grass straining upwards point me in the right direction. Love,
Love gives us a chance to win through despite our own being.

Marzena Broda

To wake up ...
by Marzena Broda
(1966-)
[from *Young Poets of a New Poland*, ed. by Donald Pirie; pub. Forest Books, Unesco Publishing, 1993.]

To wake up before the sunrise,
to see the sky's ceiling propped up by a meadow,
a sleepy evening rocked by a cloud.
To touch, while light still dozes inside the earth
a Tatra mountainscape painted with time's gloss.
To pray for everything, to forget anxieties,
poems, that comfortable armchair in the city,
to make out the stars at night above human habitation,
to hold your face in my hands at the hour
of rest. Oh, if only I could get used to silence!
To hear beech trees wilt and their leaves rust
when scattered over the world's floor.
Blood flows more silently.
The landscape yellows. And rain closes the eyelids.

Czesław Miłosz

Fear

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988]

"Father, where are you? The forest is wild,
there are creatures here, the bushes sway.
The orchids burst with poisonous fire,
Treacherous chasms lurk under our feet.

"Where are you, Father? The night has no end.
From now on darkness will last forever.
The travelers are homeless, they will die of hunger,
Our bread is bitter and hard as stone.

"The hot breath of the terrible beast
Comes nearer and nearer, it belches its stench.
Where have you gone, Father? Why do you not pity
Your children lost in this murky wood?"

Recovery

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988]

"Here I am--why this senseless fear?
The night is over, the day will soon arise.
You hear. The shepherds' horns already sound,
And stars grow pale over the rosy glow.

"The path is straight. We are at the edge.
Down in the village the little bell chimes.
Roosters on the fences greet the light
And the earth steams, fertile and happy.

"Here it is still dark. Fog like a river flood
Swaddles the black clumps of bilberries.
But the dawn on bright stilts wades in from the shore
And the ball of the sun, ringing, rolls."

The Sun

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

All colors come from the sun. And it does not have
Any particular color, for it contains them all.
And the whole Earth is like a poem
While the sun above represents the artist.

Whoever wants to paint the variegated world
Let him never look straight up at the sun
Or he will lose the memory of things he has seen.
Only burning tears will stay in his eyes.

Let him kneel down, lower his face to the grass,
And look at light reflected by the ground.
There he will find everything we have lost:
The stars and the roses, the dusks and the dawns.

Warsaw, 1943

A Song on the End of the World

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Anthony Miłosz

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.

As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.

Warsaw, 1944

The Poor Poet

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

The first movement is singing,
A free voice, filling mountains and valleys.
The first movement is joy,
But it is taken away.

And now that the years have transformed my blood
And thousands of planetary systems shave been born and died in my flesh,
I sit, a sly and angry poet
With malevolently squinted eyes,

And, weighing a pen in my hand,
I plot revenge.

I poise the pen and it puts forth twigs and leaves, it is covered with blossoms
And the scent of that tree is impudent, for there, on the real earth,
Such trees do not grow, and like an insult
To suffering humanity is the scent of that tree.

Some take refuge in despair, which is sweet
Like strong tobacco, like a glass of vodka drunk in the hour of annihilation.
Others have the hope of fools, rosy as erotic dreams.

Still others find peace in the idolatry of country,
Which can last for a long time,
Although little longer than the nineteenth century lasts.

But to me a cynical hope is given,
For since I opened my eyes I have seen only the glow of fires, massacres,
Only injustice, humiliation, and the laughable shame of braggarts.

To me is given the hope of revenge on others and on myself,

For I was he who knew
And took from it no profit for myself.

Warsaw, 1944

Café

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Of those at the table in the café
where on winter noons a garden of frost glittered on windowpanes
I alone survived.
I could go in there if I wanted to
and drumming my fingers in a chilly void
convoke shadows.

With disbelief I touch the cold marble,
with disbelief I touch my own hand.
It--is, and I--am in ever novel becoming,
while they are locked forever and ever in their last word, their last glance,
and as remote as Emperor Valentinian
or the chiefs of the Massagetes, about whom I know nothing,
though hardly one year has passed, or two or three.

I may still cut trees in the woods of the far north,
I may speak from a platform or shoot a film
using techniques they never heard of.
I may learn the taste of fruits from ocean islands
and be photographed in attire from the second half of the century.
But they are forever like busts in frock coats and jabots
in some monstrous encyclopedia.

Sometimes when the evening aurora paints the roofs in a poor street
and I contemplate the sky, I see in the white clouds
a table wobbling. The waiter whirls with his tray
and they look at me with a burst of laughter
for I still don't know what it is to die at the hand of man,
they know--they know it well.

Warsaw, 1944

A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988]

Bees build around red liver,
Ants build around black bone.
It has begun: the tearing, the trampling on silks,
It has begun: the breaking of glass, wood, copper, nickel, silver, foam
Of gypsum, iron sheets, violin strings, trumpets, leaves, balls, crystals.
Poof! Phosphorescent fire from yellow walls
Engulfs animal and human hair.

Bees build around the honeycomb of lungs,
Ants build around white bone.
Torn is paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax,
Fiber, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin, wire.
The roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat seizes the foundations.
Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down,
With ;one leafless tree.

Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his way,
With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.
He touches buried bodies, counts them, pushes on,
He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapor,
The ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum.
Bees build around a red trace.
Ants build around the place left by my body.

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch
Who has sat much in the light of candles
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?
My broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.

Warsaw, 1943

A Legend

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988]

Nobody knows the beginning of the city.

Slushy ruts, a call at the ferry,
Resin torches, a fisherman leaning on a spear,
And fish pots and the mists of the shallows.
Then the riders with lances lead in
Half-naked prisoners and pine after pine
Falls down and with huge timbers
A castle is erected above the swift river.
Dark rafters. The whirling of dogs
Crunching bones in the gleam of shields and swords,
Shaky rush-lights and whiskered shadows
Bent over pewter goblets, raucous songs.
In bedchambers, amid spearshafts and leather bands,
Giggling of old gods. In the thicket at night
Their wild stomping and whistling. And yet already a bell
Trickled its tiny voice through the wilderness,
And the monks, raised on their stirrups,
Were turning toward the people below
Who, uncertain, faltered between their rite
And the force of the new imperious laws.

Who knows the beginning? We lived in this city
Without caring about its past. Its walls
Seemed to us eternal. Those who lived there before us
Were just a legend, undeciphered.
Our age is better, we would say. No plague, no sword
To pursue us, so why should we look back?
Let the centuries of terror sleep in the hard earth.
We tuned our instruments, evenings
In a circle of friends would bring us gladness,
Under the colorful lanterns and the green of chestnuts
Feasts were celebrated. The slenderness of our women
Pleased our eyes. Our painters used to choose
Joyous colors. Till that day arrived.

The makeup streamed down women's cheeks. Their rings
Rattled against the pavement. Eyes
turned to the indifferent abysses of heavens
And accepted death. Foundations of ornate buildings
Burst, the dust of crushed brick
Rose with smoke to the sun, pigeons
Were falling from the sky. We propped our street fortresses
Against the rubble of our homes, till they fell,
Our fortresses, and hands, and arms. The smell of defeat,
Cadaverous, nauseating, atrocious silence
After the din of battle descended on smoldering cinders,
The autumn rain beat down and the survivors

Received upon their brows the stigma of the slave.
The enemy debased memory, ascribing to himself
Both ancient and future glory.

And then, sitting where once it had stood,
That beautiful city, sifting through our fingers
The sand of the barrens, we discovered
The sweet name of our country. It was no more
Than the sand and the rustle of the wind in wormwood.
For a country without a past is nothing, a word
That, hardly spoken, loses its meaning,
A perishable wall destroyed by flame,
An echo of animal emotions. In the sand we saw
The ashes of centuries mixed with fresh blood.
Pride then left us and we rendered homage
To men and women who once lived and ever since
We have had our home founded in history.

Washington, D.C., 1949

Veni Creator

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Pinsky

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czeslaw Milosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

Come, Holy Spirit,
bending or not bending the grasses,
appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards or when snow
covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.
I am only a man: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in church
lift its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,
not me--after all I have some decency--
and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you.

Berkeley, 1961

Incantation

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Pinsky

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czeslaw Milosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language,
And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.
It puts what should be above things as they are,
Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope.
It does not know Jew from Greek or slave from master,
Giving us the estate of the world to manage.
It saves austere and transparent phrases
From the filthy discord of tortured words.
It says that everything is new under the sun,
Opens the congealed fist of the past.
Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia
And poetry, her ally in the service of the good.
As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth,
The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.
Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit.
Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

Berkeley, 1968

Ars Poetica?

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

I have always aspired to a more spacious form
that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
and would let us understand each other without exposing
the author or reader to sublime agonies.

In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by a daimonion,
though it's an exaggeration to maintain that he must be an angel.
It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from,
when so often they're put to shame by the disclosure of their frailty.

What reasonable man would like to be a city of demons,
who behave as if they were at home, speak in many tongues,
and who, not satisfied with stealing his lips or hand,

work at changing his destiny for their convenience?

It's true that what is morbid is highly valued today,
and so you may think that I am only joking
or that I've devised just one more means
of praising Art with the help of irony.

There was a time when only wise books were read,
helping us to bear our pain and misery.
This, after all, is not quite the same
as leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.

And yet the world is different from what it seems to be
and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.
People therefore preserve silent integrity;
thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors.

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,
under unbearable duress and only with the hope
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.

Berkeley, 1968

HIGHER ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF DISCIPLINE DERIVED FROM THE SPEECH BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF THE UNIVERSAL STATE IN 2068

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

We call for discipline not expecting applause.
Because we do not need their cheers.
Loyal citizens can enjoy our protection
And we demand nothing in exchange, except obedience.
Nevertheless, much evidence inclines us
To express the hope that people correctly assess
How much the rightness of the line we take
Differs from their irrational suppositions and desires.

We can say boldly that we, and no one else,
Rescued them from a waste of contradictory opinions,
Where what is true does not have full weight
For equal weight is given to untruth.
We led them from that place, from that wasteland
Where each of them, alone in his own ignorance,
Meditated on the sense and nonsense of the world.
Freedom for them meant nakedness of women,
And their bread had no taste: the bakeries were full of it.
Under the name of Art they favored the antics of their boredom
And a daily terror of passing time.
We, and no one else, discovered the Law of Blackout,
Being aware that a mind left to itself
Reached out for the ultimate, not on its scale.
We, and no one else, discovered the Law of Diminished Goals
For a necessary condition of happiness is poverty and rancor.
And when today, foolish, they curse prohibitions
They already fear that we may lift prohibitions.
Thanks to repression they imagine they are bigger than nature,
Giants, angels maybe, stopped by force in their flight.

A Story

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Renata Gorczynski and Robert Pinsky

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

Now I will tell Meader's story; I have a moral in view.
He was pestered by a grizzly so bold and malicious
That he used to snatch caribou meat from the eaves of the cabin.
Not only that. He ignored men and was unafraid of fire.
One night he started battering the door
And broke the window with his paw, so they curled up
With their shotguns beside them, and waited for the dawn.
He came back in the evening, and Meader shot him at close range,
Under the left shoulder blade. Then it was jump and run,
A real storm of a run: a grizzly, Meader says,
Even when he's been hit in the heart, will keep running
Until he falls down. Later, Meader found him
By following the trail--and then he understood
What lay behind the bear's odd behavior:
Half of the beast's jaw was eaten away by an abscess, and caries.
Toothache, for years. An ache without comprehensible reason,
Which soften drives us to senseless action
And gives us blind courage. We have nothing to lose,
We come out of the forest, and not always with the hope
That we will be cured by some dentist from heaven.

Berkeley, 1969

On Angels

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

All was taken away from you: white dresses,
wings, even existence.
Yet I believe you,
messengers.

There, where the world is turned inside out,
a heavy fabric embroidered with stars and beasts,
you scroll, inspecting the trustworthy seams.

Short is your stay here:
now and then at a matinal hour, if the sky is clear,
in a melody repeated by a bird,
or in the smell of apples at the close of day
when the light makes the orchards magic.

They say somebody has invented you
but to me this does not sound convincing
for humans invented themselves as well.

The vote--no doubt it is a valid proof,
as it can belong only to radiant creatures,
weightless and winged (after all, why not?),
Girdled with the lightning.

I have heard that voice many a time when asleep
and, what is strange, I understood more or less
an order or an appeal in an unearthly tongue:

day draws near
another one
do what you can.

Berkeley, 1969

Secretaries

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing
That is dictated to me and a few others.
Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth
Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle
Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed
Is not up to us to inquire, we won't read it anyway.
Berkeley, 1975

Proof

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

And yet you experienced the flames of Hell.
You can even say what they are like: real,
Ending in sharp hooks so that they tear up flesh
Piece by Piece, to the bone. You walked in the street
And it was going on: the lashing and bleeding.
You remember, therefore you have no doubt: there is a Hell for certain.
Berkeley, 1975

READING THE JAPANESE POET ISSA
(1762-1826)

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass

[from *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*, Czesław Miłosz, Penguin Books, London, England, 1988.]

A good world--
dew drops fall
by ones, by twos

A few strokes of ink and there it is.
Great stillness of white fog,
waking up in the mountains,
geese calling,
a well hoist creaking,
and the droplets forming on the eaves.

Or perhaps that other house.
The invisible ocean,
fog until noon
dripping in a heavy rain from the boughs of the redwoods,
sirens droning below on the bay.

Poetry can do that much and no more.
For we cannot really know the man who speaks,
what his bones and sinews are like,
the porosity of the skin,
how he feels inside.
And whether this is the village of Szlembark
above which we used to find salamanders,
garishly colored like the dresses of Teresa Rozkowska,
or another continent and different names.
Kotarbiski, Zawada, Erin, Melanie.
No people in this poem. As if it subsisted
by the very disappearance of places and people.

A cuckoo calls
for me, for the mountain,
for me, for the mountain

Sitting under his lean-to on a rocky ledge
listening to a waterfall hum in the gorge,
he had before him the folds of a wooded mountain
and the setting sun which touched it
and he thought: how is it that the voice of the cuckoo
always turns either here or there?
This could as well not be in the order of things.

In this world
we walk on the roof of Hell
gazing at flowers

To know and not to speak.
In that way one forgets.
What is pronounced strengthens itself.
What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence.
The tongue is sold out to the sense of touch.
Our human kind persists by warmth and softness:
my little rabbit, my little bear, my kitten.

Anything but a shiver in the freezing dawn
and fear of oncoming day
and the overseer's whip.
Anything but winter streets
and nobody on the whole earth
and the penalty of consciousness.
Anything but.

Berkeley, 1978

Campo dei Fiori

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Olouis Iribarne and David Brooks

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

In Rome on the Campo dei Fiori
Baskets of olives and lemons,
Cobbles spattered with wine
And the wreckage of flowers.
Vendors cover the trestles
With rose-pink fish;
Armfuls of dark grapes
Heaped on peach-down.

On this same square
They burned Giordano Bruno.
Henchmen kindled the pyre
Close-pressed by the mob.
Before the flames had died
The taverns were full again,
Baskets of olives and lemons
Again on the vendors' shoulders.

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori
In Warsaw by the sky-carousel
One clear spring evening
To the strains of a carnival tune.
The bright melody drowned
The salvos from the ghetto wall,
And couples were flying
High in the cloudless sky.

At times wind from the burning
Would drift dark kites along
And riders on the carousel
Caught petals in midair.
That same hot wind
Blew open the skirts of the girls
And the crowds were laughing
On that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

Someone will read as moral
That the people of Rome or Warsaw
Haggle, laugh, make love
As they pass by martyrs' pyres.

Someone else will read
Of the passing of things human,
Of the oblivion
Born before the flames have died.

But that day I thought only
Of the loneliness of the dying,
Of how, when Giordano
Climbed to his burning
There were no words
In any human tongue
To be left for mankind,
Mankind who live on.

Already they were back at their wine
Or peddled their white starfish,
Baskets of olives and lemons

They had shouldered to the fair,
And he already distanced
As if centuries had passed
While they paused just a moment
For his flying in the fire.

Those dying here, the lonely
Forgotten by the world,
Our tongue becomes for them
The language of an ancient planet.
Until, when all is legend
And many years have passed,
On a great Campo dei Fiori
Rage will kindle at a poet's word.

Father's Incantations

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995]

O sweet master, with how much peace
Your serene wisdom fills the heart!
I love you, I am in your power
Even though I will never see your face.

Your ashes have long been scattered,
Your sins and follies no one remembers.
And for ages you will remain perfect

Like your book drawn by thought from nothingness.

You knew bitterness and you knew doubt
But the memory of your faults has vanished.
And I know why I cherish you today:
Men are small but their works are great.

Faith

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Faith is in you whenever you look
At a dewdrop or a floating leaf
And know that they are because they have to be.
Even if you close your eyes and dream up things
The world will remain as it has always been
And the leaf will be carried by the waters of the river.

You have faith also when you hurt your foot
Against a sharp rock and you know
That rocks are here to hurt our feet.
See the long shadow that is cast by the tree?
We and the flowers throw shadows on the earth.
What has no shadow has no strength to live.

Hope

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Hope is with you when you believe
The earth is not a dream but living flesh,
That sight, touch, and hearing do not lie,
That all things you have ever seen here
Are like a garden looked at from a gate.

You cannot enter. But you're sure it's there.
Could we but look more clearly and wisely
We might discover somewhere in the garden
A strange new flower and an unnamed star.

Some people say we should not trust our eyes,
That there is nothing, just a seeming,
These are the ones who have no hope.
They think that the moment we turn away,

The world, behind our backs, ceases to exist,
As if snatched up by the hands of thieves.

Love

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills--
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn't always understand.

The Excursion to the Forest

by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

The trees so huge you can't see treetops.
The setting sun fixes a rosy flame
On every tree, as on a candlestick,
And tiny people walk a path below.

Let us raise our heads, hold hands
So that we don't lose our way in the tangled grass.
The night has begun to put seals on the flowers,
Color after color is flowing down the sky.

And there, above, a feast. Jugs of gold,
Red wine is being poured in aspen copper.
And an airborne coach carries gifts
For the invisible kings or for the bears.

Song of a Citizen

by Czesław Miłosz

trans. by Czesław Miłosz

[from *Selected Poems*, Czesław Miłosz, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1995.]

A stone from the depths that has witnessed the seas drying up
and a million white fish leaping in agony,
I, poor man, see a multitude of white-bellied nations
without freedom. I see the crab feeding on their flesh.

I have seen the fall of States and the perdition of tribes,
the flight of kings and emperors, the power of tyrants.
I can say now, in this hour,
that I--am, while everything expires,
that it is better to be a live dog than a dead lion,
as the Scripture says.

A poor man, sitting on a cold chair, pressing my eyelids,
I sigh and think of a starry sky,
of non-Euclidean space, of amoebas and their pseudopodia,
of tall mounds of termites.

When walking, I am asleep, when sleeping, I dream reality,
pursued and covered with sweat, I run.
On city squares lifted up by the glaring dawn,
beneath marble remnants of blasted-down gates,
I deal in vodka and gold.

And yet so often I was near,
I reached into the heart of metal, the soul of earth, of fire, of water.
And the unknown unveiled its face
as a night reveals itself, serene, mirrored by tide.
Lustrous copper-leaved gardens greeted me
that disappear as soon as you touch them.

And so near, just outside the window--the greenhouse of the worlds
where a tiny beetle and a spider are equal to planets,
where a wandering atom flares up like Saturn,
and, close by, harvesters drink from a cold jug
in scorching summer.

This I wanted and nothing more. In my later years
like old Goethe to stand before the face of the earth,
and recognize it and reconcile it
with my work built up, a forest citadel
on a river of shifting lights and brief shadows.
This I wanted and nothing more. So who
is guilty? Who deprived me
of my youth and my ripe years, who seasoned
my best years with horror? Who,
who ever is to blame, who, O God?

And I can think only about the starry sky,
about the tall mounds of termites.

Warsaw, 1943

Wisława Szymborska

Pietà

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

In the town where the hero was born you may:
gaze at the monument, admire its size,
shoo two chickens from the empty museum's steps,
ask for his mother's address,
knock, push the creaking door open.
Her bearing is erect, her hair is straight, her gaze is clear.
You may tell her that you've just arrived from Poland.
You may bear greetings. Make your questions loud and clear.
Yes, she loved him very much. Yes, he was born that way.
Yes, she was standing by the prison wall that morning.
Yes, she heard the shots.
You may regret not having brought a camera,
a tape recorder. Yes, she has seen such things.
She read his final letter on the radio.
She sang his favorite lullabies once on TV.
And once she even acted in a movie, in tears
from the bright lights. Yes, the memory still moves her.
Yes, just a little tired now. Yes, it will pass.
You may get up. Thank her. Say goodbye. Leave,
Passing by the new arrivals in the hall.

The Acrobat

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

From trapeze to
to trapeze, in the hush that

that follows the drum roll's sudden pause, through
through the startled air, more swiftly than
than his body's weight, which once again
again is late for its own fall.

Solo. Or even less than solo,
less, because he's crippled, missing
missing wings, missing them so much
that he can't miss the chance
to soar on shamefully unfeathered
naked vigilance alone.

Arduous ease,
watchful agility,
and calculated inspiration. Do you see
how he waits to pounce in flight; do you know
how he plots from head to toe
against his very being; do you know, do you see
how cunningly he weaves himself through his own former shape
and works to seize this swaying world
by stretching out the arms he has conceived--

beautiful beyond belief at this passing
at this very passing moment that's just passed.

No End of Fun

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

So he's got to have happiness,
he's got to have truth, too,
he's got to have eternity--
did you ever!

He has only just learned to tell dreams from waking;
only just realized that he is he;
only just whittled with his hand né fin
a flint, a rocket ship,
easily drowned in the ocean's teaspoon,
not even funny enough to tickle the void;
sees only with his eyes;
hears only with his ears:
his speech's personal best is the conditional;

he uses his reason to pick holes in reason.
In short, he's next to no one,
but his head's full of freedom, omniscience, and the Being
beyond his foolish mean--
did you ever!

For he does apparently exist.
He genuinely came to be
beneath one of the more parochial stars.
He's lively and quite active in his fashion.
His capacity for wonder is well advanced
for a crystal's deviant descendant.
And considering his difficult childhood
spent kowtowing to the herd's needs,
he's already quite an individual indeed--
did you ever!

Carry on, then, if only for the moment
that it takes a tiny galaxy to blink!
One wonders what will become of him,
since he does in fact seem to be.
And as far as being goes, he really tries quite hard.
Quite hard indeed--one must admit.
With that ring in his nose, with that toga, that sweater.
He's no end of fun, for all you say.
Poor little beggar.
A human, if ever we saw one.

Could Have

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck--there was a forest.
You were in luck--there were no trees.
You were in luck--a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
a jamb, a turn, a quarter inch, an instant.
You were in luck--just then a straw went floating by.

As a result, because, although, despite.
What would have happened if a hand, a foot,
within an inch, a hairsbreadth from
an unfortunate coincidence.

So you're here? Still dizzy from another dodge,
  Close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
How your heart pounds inside me.

Theatre Impressions

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

For me the tragedy's most important act is the sixth:
the raising of the dead from the stage's battlegrounds,
the straightening of wigs and fancy gowns,
removing knives from stricken breasts,
taking nooses from lifeless necks,
lining up among the living
to face the audience.

The bows, both solo and ensemble--
the pale hand on the wounded heart,
the curtseys of the hapless suicide,
the bobbing of the chopped-off head.

The bows in pairs--
rage extends its arm to meekness,
the victim's eyes smile at the torturer,
the rebel indulgently walks beside the tyrant.

Eternity trampled by the golden slipper's toe.
Redeeming values swept aside with the swish of a wide-brimmed hat.
The unrepentant urge to start all over tomorrow.

Now enter, single file, the hosts who died early on,
in Acts 3 and 4, or between scenes.
The miraculous return of all those lost without a trace.
The thought that they've been waiting patiently offstage
without taking off their makeup
or their costumes
moves me more than all the tragedy's tirades.

But the curtain's fall is the most uplifting part,
the things you see before it hits the floor:
here one hand quickly reaches for a flower,
there another hand picks up a fallen sword.
Only then one last, unseen, hand
does its duty
and grabs me by the throat.

Voices

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

You can't move an inch, my dear Marcus Emilius,
without Aborigines sprouting up as if from the earth itself.

Your heel sticks fast amidst Rutulians.
Your founder knee-deep in Sabines and Latins.
You're up to your waist, your neck, your nostrils
in Aequians and Volscians, dear Lucius Fabius.

These irksome little nations, thick as flies.
It's enough to make you sick, dear Quintus Decius.

One town, then the next, then the hundred and seventieth.
The Fidenates' stubbornness. The Feliscans' ill will.
The shortsighted Ecetrans. The capricious Antemnates.
The Laricanians and Pelignians, offensively aloof.
They drive us mild-mannered sorts to sterner measures
with every new mountain we cross, dear Gaius Cloelius.

If only they weren't always in the way, the Auruncians, the Marsians,
but they always do get in the way, dear Spurius Manlius.

Tarquinians where you'd least expect them, Etruscans on all sides.
If that weren't enough, Volsinians and Veintians.

The Aulertians, beyond all reason. And, of course,
the endlessly vexatious Sapinians, my dear Sextus Oppius.

Little nations do have little minds.
The circle of thick skulls expands around us.
Reprehensible customs. Backward laws.
Ineffectual gods, my dear Titus Vilius.

Heaps of Hernicians. Swarms of Murricinians.
Antlike multitudes of Vestians and Samnites.
The farther you go, the more there are, dear
Servius Follius.

These little nations are pitiful indeed.
Their foolish ways require supervision
with every new river we ford, dear Aulus Iunius.

Every new horizon threatens me.
That's how I'd put it, my dear Hostius Melius.

To which I, Hostus Melius, would reply, my dear
Appius Papius: March on! The world has got to
end somewhere.

The Letters of the Dead

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

We read the letters of the dead like helpless gods,
but gods, nonetheless, since we know the dates that follow.
We know which debts will never be repaid.
Which widows will remarry with the corpse still warm.
Poor dead, blindfolded dead,
gullible, fallible, pathetically prudent.
We see the faces people make behind their backs.
We catch the sound of wills being ripped to shreds.
The dead sit before us comically, as if on buttered bread,
or frantically pursue the hats blown from their heads.
Their bad taste, Napoleon, steam, electricity,
their fatal remedies for curable diseases,
their foolish apocalypse according to St. John,
their counterfeit heaven on earth according to Jean-Jacques....
We watch the pawns on their chessboards in silence,
even though we see them three squares later.

Everything the dead predicted has turned out completely different.
Or a little bit different--which is to say, completely different.
The most fervent of them gaze confidingly into our eyes:
their calculations tell them that they'll find perfection there.

Advertisement

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

I'm a tranquilizer.
I'm effective at home.
I work in the office.
I can take exams
or the witness stand.
I mend broken cups with care.
All you have to do is take me,
let me melt beneath your tongue,
just gulp me
with a glass of water.

I know how to handle misfortune,
how to take bad news.
I can minimize injustice,
lighten up God's absence,
or pick the widow's veil that suits your face.
What are you waiting for--
have faith in my chemical compassion.

You're still a young man/woman.
It's not too late to learn how to unwind.
Who said
you have to take it on the chin?

Let me have your abyss.
I'll cushion it with sleep.
You'll thank me for giving you
four paws to fall on.

Sell me your soul.
There are no other takers.

There is no other devil anymore.

Going Home

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

He came home. Said nothing.
It was clear, though, that something had gone wrong.
He lay down fully dressed.
Pulled the blanket over his head.
Tucked up his knees.
He's nearly forty, but not at the moment.
He exists just as he did inside his mother's womb,
clad in seven walls of skin, in sheltered darkness.
Tomorrow he'll give a lecture
on homeostasis in megagalactic cosmonautics.
For now, though, he has curled up and gone to sleep.

Discovery

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

I believe in the great discovery.
I believe in the man who will make the discovery.
I believe in the fear of the man who will make the discovery.

I believe in his face going white,
his queasiness, his upper lip drenched in cold sweat.

I believe in the burning of his notes,
burning them into ashes,
burning them to the last scrap.

I believe in the scattering of numbers,
scattering them without regret.

I believe in the man's haste,
in the precision of his movements,
in his free will.

I believe in the shattering of tablets,
the pouring out of liquids,
the extinguishing of rays.

I am convinced this will end well,
that it will not be too late,
that it will take place without witnesses.

I'm sure no one will find out what happened,
not the wife, not the wall,
not even the bird that might squeal in its song.

I believe in the refusal to take part.
I believe in the ruined career.
I believe in the wasted years of work.
I believe in the secret taken to the grave.

These words soar for me beyond all rules
without seeking support from actual examples.
My faith is strong, blind, and without foundation.

Dinosaur Skeleton

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Beloved Brethren,
we have before us an example of incorrect proportions.
Behold! the dinosaur's skeleton looms above--

Dear Friends,
on the left we see the tail trailing into one infinity,
on the right, the neck juts into another--

Esteemed Comrades,
in between, four legs that finally mired in the slime
beneath this hillock of a trunk--

Gentle Citizens,
nature does not err, but it loves its little joke:
please note the laughably small head--

Ladies, Gentlemen,
a head this size does not have room for foresight,
and that is why its owner is extinct--

Honored Dignitaries,
a mind too small, an appetite too large,
more senseless sleep than prudent apprehension--

Distinguished Guests,
we're in far better shape in this regard,
life is beautiful and the world is ours--

Venerated Delegation,
the starry sky above the thinking reed
and moral law within it--

Most Reverend Deputation,
such success does not come twice
and perhaps beneath this single sun alone--

Inestimable Council,
how deft the hands,
how eloquent the lips,
what a head on these shoulders--

Supremest of Courts,
so much responsibility in place of a vanished tail--

Birthday

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

So much world all at once--how it rustles and bustles!
Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels,
the flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather--
how to line them all up, how to put them together?
All the thickets and crickets and creepers and creeks.
The beeches and leeches alone could take weeks.
Chinchillas, gorillas, and sarsaparillas--
thanks so much, but this excess of kindness could kill us.
Where's the jar for this burgeoning burdock, brooks' babble,
rooks' squabble, snakes' squiggle, abundance, and trouble?
How to plug up the gold mines and pin down the fox,
how to cope with the lynx, bobolinks, streptococs!
Take dioxide: a lightweight, but mighty in deeds;
what about octopodes, what about centipedes?
I could look into prices, but don't have the nerve:
these are products I just can't afford, don't deserve.
Isn't sunset a little too much for two eyes
that, who knows, may not open to see the sun rise?
I am just passing through, it's a five-minute stop.

I won't catch what is distant; what's too close, I'll mix up.
While trying to plumb what the void's inner sense is,
I'm bound to pass by all these poppies and pansies.
What a loss when you think how much effort was spent
perfecting this petal, this pistil, this scent
for the one-time appearance, which is all they're allowed,
so aloofly precise and so fragilely proud.

Allegro Ma Non Troppo

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Life, you're beautiful (I say)
you just couldn't get more fecund,
more befrogged or nightingaily,
more anthillful or sproutspouting.

I'm trying to court life's favor,
to get into its good graces,
to anticipate its whims.
I'm always the first to bow,

always there where it can see me
with my humble, reverent face,
soaring on the wings of rapture,
falling under waves of wonder.

Oh how grassy is this hopper,
how this berry ripely rasps.
I would never have conceived it
if I weren't conceived myself!

Life (I say) I've no idea
what I could compare you to.
No one else can make a pine cone
and then make the pine cone's clone.

I praise your inventiveness,
bounty, sweep, exactitude,
sense of order--gifts that border
on witchcraft and wizardry.

I just don't want to upset you,
tease or anger, vex or rile.

For millennia, I've been trying
to appease you with my smile.

I tug at life by its leaf hem:
will it stop for me, just once,
momentarily forgetting
to what end it runs and runs?

Autotomy

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
It abandons one self to a hungry world
and with the other self it flees.

It violently divides into doom and salvation,
retribution and reward, what has been and what will be.

An abyss appears in the middle of its body
between what instantly become two foreign shores.

Life on one shore, death on the other.
Here hope and there despair.

If there are scales, the pans don't move.
If there is justice, this is it.

To die just as required, without excess.
To grow back just what's needed from what's left.

We, too, can divide ourselves, it's true.
But only into flesh and a broken whisper.
Into flesh and poetry.

The throat on one side, laughter on the other,
quiet, quickly dying out.

Here the heavy heart, there *non omnis moriar*--
just three little words, like a flight's three feathers.

The abyss doesn't divide us.
The abyss surrounds us.

Frozen Motion

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

This isn't Miss Duncan, the noted danseuse?
Not the drifting cloud, the wafting zephyr, the Bacchante,
moonlit waters, waves swaying, breezes sighing?

Standing this way, in the photographer's atelier,
heftily, fleshily wrested from music and motion,
she's cast to the mercies of a pose,
forced to bear false witness.

Thick arms raised above her head,
a knotted knee protrudes from her short tunic,
left leg forward, naked foot and toes,
with 5 (count them) toenails.

One short step from eternal art into artificial eternity--
I reluctantly admit that it's better than nothing
and more fitting than otherwise.

Behind the screen, a pink corset, a handbag,
in it a ticket for a steamship
leaving tomorrow, that is, sixty years ago;
never again, but still at nine a.m. sharp.

The Classic

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

A few clods of dirt, and his life will be forgotten.
The music will break free from circumstance.
No more coughing of the maestro over minuets.
Poultices will be torn off.
Fire will consume the dusty, lice-ridden wig.
Ink spots will vanish from the lace cuff.
The shoes, inconvenient witnesses, will be tossed on the trash heap.
The least gifted of his pupils will get the violin.
Butchers' bills will be removed from between the music sheets.
His poor mother's letters will line the stomachs of mice.

The ill-fated love will fade away.
Eyes will stop shedding tears.
The neighbors' daughter will find a use for the pink ribbon.
The age, thank God, isn't Romantic yet.
Everything that's not a quartet
will become a forgettable fifth.
Everything that's not a quintet
will become a superfluous sixth.
Everything that's not a choir made of forty angels
will fall silent, reduced to barking dogs, a gendarme's belch.
The aloe plant will be taken from the window
along with a dish of fly poison and the pomade pot,
and the view of the garden (oh yes!) will be revealed--
the garden that was never here.
Now hark! ye mortals, listen, listen now,
take heed, in rapt amazement,
O rapt, O stunned, O heedful mortals, listen,
O listeners--now listen--be all ears--

In Praise of Dreams

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

In my dreams
I paint like Vermeer van Delft.

I speak fluent Greek
and not just with the living.

I drive a car
that does what I want it to.

I am gifted
and write mighty epics.

I hear voices
as clearly as any venerable saint.

My brilliance as a pianist
would stun you.

I fly the way we ought to,
i.e., on my own.

Falling from the roof,
I tumble gently to the grass.

I've got no problem
breathing under water.

I can't complain:
I've been able to locate Atlantis.

It's gratifying that I can always
wake up before dying.

As soon as war breaks out,
I roll over on my other side.

I'm a child of my age,
but I don't have to be.

A few years ago
I saw two suns.

And the night before last a penguin,
clear as day.

True Love

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

True love. Is it normal,
is it serious, is it practical?
What does the world get from two people
who exist in a world of their own?

Placed on the same pedestal for no good reason,
drawn randomly from millions, but convinced
it had to happen this way--in reward for what?
For nothing.
The light descends from nowhere.
Why on these two and not on others?
Doesn't this outrage justice? Yes it does.
Doesn't it disrupt our painstakingly erected principles,
and cast the moral from the peak? Yes on both accounts.

Look at the happy couple.

Couldn't they at least try to hide it,
fake a little depression for their friends' sake!
Listen to them laughing--it's an insult.
The language they use--deceptively clear.
And their little celebrations, rituals,
the elaborate mutual routines--
it's obviously a plot behind the human race's back!

It's hard even to guess how far things might go
if people start to follow their example.
What could religion and poetry count on?
What would be remembered? What renounced?
Who'd want to stay within bounds?

True love. Is it really necessary?
Tact and common sense tell us to pass over it in silence,
like a scandal in Life's highest circles.
Perfectly good children are born without its help.
It couldn't populate the planet in a million years,
it comes along so rarely.

Let the people who never find true love
keep saying that there's no such thing.

Their faith will make it easier for them to live and die.

Under One Small Star

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.
My apologies to necessity if I'm mistaken, after all.
Please, don't be angry, happiness, that I take you as my due.
May my dead be patient with the way my memories fade.
My apologies to time for all the world I overlook each second.
My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.
Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.
Forgive me, open wounds, for pricking my finger.
I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths.
I apologize to those who wait in railway stations for being asleep today at five a.m.
Pardon me, hounded hope, for laughing from time to time.
Pardon me, deserts, that I don't rush to you bearing a spoonful of water.
And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,
your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,

forgive me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.
My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs.
My apologies to great questions for small answers.
Truth, please don't pay me much attention.
Dignity, please be magnanimous.
Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the
occasional thread from your train.
Soul, don't take offense that I've only got you now and then.
My apologies to everything that I can't be everywhere at once.
My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.
I know I won't be justified as long as I live,
since I myself stand in my own way.
Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,
then labor heavily so that they may seem light.

A Large Number
[Version #1]
by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Four billion people on this earth,
but my imagination is still the same.
It's bad with large numbers.
It's still taken by particularity.
It flits in the dark like a flashlight,
illuminating only random faces
while all the rest go blindly by,
never coming to mind and never really missed.
But even a Dante couldn't get it right.
Let alone someone who is not.
Even with all the muses behind me.

Non omnis moriar--a premature worry.
But am I entirely alive and is that enough.
It never was, and now less than ever.
My choices are rejections, since there is no other way,
but what I reject is more numerous,
denser, more demanding than before.
A little poem, a sigh, at the cost of indescribable losses.
I whisper my reply to my stentorian calling.
I can't tell you how much I pass over in silence.
A mouse at the foot of the maternal mountain.
Life lasts as long as a few signs scratched by a claw in the sand.

My dreams--even they're not a populous as they should be.
They hold more solitude than noisy crowds.
Sometimes a long-dead friend stops by awhile.
A single hand turns the knob.

An echo's annexes overgrow the empty house.
I run from the doorstep into a valley
that is quiet, as if no one owned it, already an anachronism.

Why there's still all this space inside me
I don't know.

A Great Number
[Version #2]
by Wisława Szymborska
(born 1923)
[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czesław Miłosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

Four billion people on this earth,
while my imagination remains as it was.
It clumsily copes with great numbers.
Still it is sensitive to the particular.
It flutters in the dark like a flashlight,
and reveals the first random faces
while all the rest stay unheeded,
unthought of, unlamented.
Yet even Dante could not retain all that.
And what of us?
Even all the Muses could not help.

Non omnis moriar--a premature worry.
Yet do I live entire and does it suffice?
It never sufficed, and especially now.
I choose by discarding, for there is no other means
but what I discard is more numerous,
more dense, more insistent than it ever was.
A little poem, a sigh, cost indescribable losses.
A thunderous call is answered by my whisper.
I cannot express how much I pass over in silence.
A mouse at the foot of a mountain in labor.
Life lasts a few marks of a claw on the sand.
My dreams--even they are not, as they ought to be,
populous.
There is more of loneliness in them than of crowds and noise.
Sometimes a person who died long ago drops in for a moment.

A door handle moves touched by a single hand.
An empty house is overgrown with annexes of an echo.
I run from the threshold down into the valley
that is silent, as if nobody's, anachronic.

How that open space is in me still--
I don't know.

Thank-You Note

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

I owe so much
to those I don't love.

The relief as I agree
that someone else needs them more.

The happiness that I'm not
the wolf to their sheep.

The peace I feel with them,
the freedom--
love can neither give
nor take that.

I don't wait for them,
as in window-to-door-and-back.
Almost as patient
as a sundial,
I understand
what love can't,
and forgive
as love never would.

From a rendezvous to a letter
is just a few days or weeks,
not an eternity.

Trips with them always go smoothly,
concerts are heard,
cathedrals visited,
scenery is seen.

And when seven hills and rivers
come between us,
the hills and rivers
can be found on any map.

They deserve the credit
if I live in three dimensions,
in nonlyrical and nonrhetorical space
with a genuine, shifting horizon.

They themselves don't realize
how much they hold in their empty hands.

"I don't owe them a thing,"
would be love's answer
to this open question.

Psalm

[Version #1]

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
How many clouds float past them with impunity:
how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;
how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil
in provocative hops!

Need I mention every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers
or alights on the roadblock at the border?
A humble robin--still, its tail resides abroad
while its beak stays home. If that weren't enough, it won't stop bobbing!

Among innumerable insects, I'll single out only the ant
between the border guard's left and right boots
blithely ignoring the questions "Where from?" and "Where to?"

Oh, to register in detail, at a glance, the chaos
prevailing on every continent!
Isn't that a privet on the far bank
smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf across the river?
And who but the octopus, with impudent long arms,
would disrupt the sacred bounds of territorial waters?

And how can we talk of order overall
when the very placement of the stars
leaves us doubting just what shines for whom?

Not to speak of the fog's reprehensible drifting!
And dust blowing all over the steppes
as if they hadn't been partitioned!
And the voices coasting on obliging airwaves,
that conspiratorial squeaking, those indecipherable mutters!

Only what is human can truly be foreign.
The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.

Psalm
[Version #2]
by Wisława Szymborska
(1923-)
trans. by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer; 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

Oh, how porous are the boundaries of man-made states!
How numerous the clouds that float unpunished over them,
how numerous the desert sands that shift from land to land,
how numerous the mountain pebbles that go rolling into alien domains
provocatively hopping!

Must I here enumerate how bird flies after bird,
or how it just now lights on the lowered barrier?
Be it but a sparrow--its tail is now abroad,
though its beak is still at home. Moreover--what a fidget!

From insects numberless I'll mention just the ant,
which between the left and right boot of the border guard
to the question: from where to where?--disclaims all response.

Oh, to see all this chaos all at once in detail,
on every continent!
For is it not the privet on the opposite bank
that smuggles its umpteenth leaf across the river?
For who, if not the cuttlefish, brazenly long-armed,
violates the sacred sphere of territorial waters?

In general can one talk of any kind of order,
if even the stars cannot be so arranged
for each to know which shines for whom?

And add to this, the reprehensible spread of the fog!
And the billowing of the dust over all the steppe's expanse,
as if it were not cut in half at all!
And the echoing of voices along the obliging waves of air:
of summoning squealings and suggestive gurgles!
Only that which is human can be truly alien.
The rest is all mixed forests, the burrowing of moles, and wind

Lot's Wife

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

They say I looked back out of curiosity,
but I could have had other reasons.
I looked back mourning my silver bowl.
Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap.
So I wouldn't have to keep staring at the righteous nape
of my husband Lot's neck.
From the sudden conviction that if I dropped dead
he shouldn't so much as hesitate.
From the disobedience of the meek.
Checking for pursuers.
Struck by the silence, hoping God had changed his mind.
Our two daughters were already vanishing over the hilltop.
I felt age within me. Distance.
The futility of wandering. Torpor.
I looked back setting my bundle down.
I looked back not knowing where to set my foot.
Serpents appeared on my path,
spiders, field mice, baby vultures.
They were neither good nor evil now--every living thing
was simply creeping or hopping along in the mass panic.
I looked back in desolation.
In shame because we had stolen away.
Wanting to cry out, to go home.
Or only when a sudden gust of wind
unbound my hair and lifted up my robe.
It seemed to me that they were watching from the walls of Sodom
and bursting into thunderous laughter again and again.
I looked back in anger.
To savor their terrible fate.
I looked back for all the reasons given above.
I looked back involuntarily.
It was only a rock that turned underfoot, growling at me.

It was a sudden crack that stopped me in my tracks.
A hamster on its hind paws tottered on the edge.
It was then we both glanced back.
No, no. I ran on,
I crept, I flew upward
until darkness fell from the heavens
and with it scorching gravel and dead birds.
I couldn't breathe and spun around and around.
Anyone who saw me must have thought I was dancing.
It's not inconceivable that my eyes were open.
It's possible I fell facing the city.

Experiment

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

As a short subject before the main feature--
in which the actors did their best
to make me cry and even laugh--
we were shown an interesting experiment
involving a head.

The head
a minute earlier was still attached to...
but now it was cut off.
Everyone could see that it didn't have a body.
The tubes dangling from the neck hooked it up to a machine
that kept its blood circulating.
The head
was doing just fine.

Without showing pain or even surprise,
it followed a moving flashlight with its eyes.
It pricked up its ears at the sound of a bell.
Its moist nose could tell
the smell of bacon from odorless oblivion,
and licking its chops with evident relish
it salivated its salute to physiology.

A dog's faithful head,
a dog's friendly head
squinted its eyes when stroked,
convinced that it was still part of a whole
that crooks its back if patted

and wags its tail.

I thought about happiness and was frightened.
For if that's all life is about
the head
was happy.

Smiles

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

The world would rather *see* hope than just hear
its song. And that's why statesmen have to smile.
their pearly whites mean they're still full of cheer.
The game's complex, the goal's far out of reach,
the outcome's still unclear--once in a while,
we need a friendly, gleaming set of teeth.

Heads of state must display unfurrowed brows
on airport runways, in the conference room.
They must embody one big, toothy "Wow!"
while pressing flesh or pressing urgent issues.
Their faces' self-regenerating tissues
make our hearts hum and our lenses zoom.

Dentistry turned to diplomatic skill
promises us a Golden Age tomorrow.
The going's rough, and so we need the laugh
of bright incisors, molars of good will.
Our times are still not safe and sane enough
for faces to show ordinary sorrow.

Dreamers keep saying, "Human brotherhood
will make this place a smiling paradise."
I'm not convinced. The statesman, in that case,
would not require facial exercise,
except from time to time: he's feeling good,
he's glad it's spring, and so he moves his face.
But human beings are, by nature, sad.
So be it, then. It isn't all that bad.

The Terrorist, He's Watching

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty.
Now it's just thirteen sixteen.
There's still time for some to go in,
and some to come out.

The terrorist has already crossed the street.
The distance keeps him out of danger,
and what a view--just like the movies.

A woman in a yellow jacket, she's going in.
A man in dark glasses, he's coming out.
Teenagers in jeans, they're talking.
Thirteen seventeen and four seconds.
The short one, he's lucky, he's getting on a scooter,
but the tall one, he's going in.

Thirteen seventeen and forty seconds.
That girl, she's walking along with a green ribbon in her hair.
But then a bus suddenly pulls in front of her.
Thirteen eighteen.
The girl's gone.
Was she that dumb, did she go in or not,
we'll see when they carry them out.

Thirteen nineteen.
somehow no one's going in.
Another guy, fat, bald, is leaving, though.
Wait a second, looks like he's looking for something in his pockets and
at thirteen twenty minus ten seconds
he goes back in for his crummy gloves.

thirteen twenty exactly.
This waiting, it's taking forever.
Any second now.
No, not yet.
Yes, now.
The bomb, it explodes.

Warning

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Don't take jesters into outer space,
that's my advice.

Fourteen lifeless planets,
a few comets, two stars.
By the time you take off for the third star,
your jesters will be out of humor.

The cosmos is what it is--
namely, perfect.
Your jesters will never forgive it.

Nothing will make them happy:
not time (too immemorial),
not beauty (no flaws),
not gravity (no use for levity).
While others drop their jaws in awe,
the jests will just yawn.

En route to the fourth star
things will only get worse.
Curdled smiles,
disrupted sleep and equilibrium,
idle chatter:
Remember that crow with the cheese in its beak,
the fly droppings on His Majesty's portrait,
the monkey in the steaming bath--
now that was living.

Narrow-minded.
They'll take Thursday over infinity any day.
Primitive.
Out of tune suits them better than the music of the spheres.
They're happiest in the cracks
between theory and practice,
cause and effect.
But this is Space, not Earth: everything's a perfect fit.

On the thirtieth planet
(with an eye to its impeccable desolation)
they'll refuse even to leave their cubicles:
"My head aches," they'll complain. "I stubbed my toe."

What a waste. What a disgrace.

So much good money lost in outer space.

In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse.
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.

Utopia

[Version #1]

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Island where all becomes clear.

Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

Utopia
[Version #2]
by Wisława Szymborska
(1923-)

trans. by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire
[from *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature*, ed. by Adam Gillon, Ludwik Krzyzanowski, and Krystyna Olszer, 2nd Edition, Hippocrene Books, NY, 1982.]

An island on which all becomes clear.
Here you can stand on the solid ground of proof.
Here are no points of interest except he point of arrival.
The bushes fairly groan under the weight of answers.
Here grows the tree of Right Conjecture
with branches disentangled since all time past.
The dazzlingly simple tree of Comprehension
hard by the spring that's named It's Just That Easy.
The deeper into the woods, the wider opens out
the Valley of the Obvious.
If doubt exists, it is dispelled by the wind.
Echo unevoked sends forth its voice
and eagerly explains the secrets of the worlds.

Off to the right a cave wherein lies Reason.
Off to the left the lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks off from the bottom and lightly floats to the surface.
Towering over the valley stands Unshakable Certainty.
From its peak emerges the Crux of the Matter.
For all its charm, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints seen along the shore
point without exception in the direction of the sea.
As if this were a place just for the leaving
And for immersion in a depth with no return,
In a life that's not for comprehending.

Archeology

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Well, my poor man,
seems we've made some progress in my field.
Millennia have passed
since you first called me archeology.

I no longer require
your stone gods,
your ruins with legible inscriptions.

Show me your whatever
and I'll tell you who you were.
Something's bottom,
something's top.
A scrap of engine. A picture tube's neck.
An inch of cable. Fingers turned to dust.
Or even less than that, or even less.

Using a method
that you couldn't have known then,
I can stir up memory
in countless elements.
Traces of blood are forever.
Lies shine.
Secret codes resound.
Doubts and intentions come to light.

If I want to
(and you can't be too sure

that I will),
I'll peer down the throat of your silence,
I'll read your views
from the sockets of your eyes,
I'll remind you in infinite detail
of what you expected from life besides death.

Show me your nothing
that you've left behind
and I'll build from it a forest and highway,
an airport, baseness, tenderness,
a missing home.

Show me your little poem
and I'll tell you why it wasn't written
any earlier or later than it was.

Oh no, you've got me wrong
Keep your funny piece of paper
with its scribbles.
[illegible] need for my ends
[illegible] ur layer of dirt
and the long gone
smell of burning

Our Ancestors' Short Lives

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Few of them made it to thirty.
Old age was the privilege of rocks and trees.
Childhood ended as fast as wolf cubs grow.
One had to hurry, to get on with life
before the sun went down,
before the first snow.

Thirteen-year-olds bearing children,
four-year-olds stalking birds' nests in the rushes,
leading the hunt at twenty--
they aren't yet, then they are gone.
Infinity's ends fused quickly.
Witches chewed charms
with all the teeth of youth intact.
A son grew to manhood beneath his father's eye.

Beneath the grandfather's blank sockets the grandson was born.

And anyway they didn't count the years.
They counted nets, pods, sheds, and axes.
Time, so generous toward any petty star in the sky,
offered them a nearly empty hand
and quickly took it back, as if the effort were too much.
One step more, two steps more
along the glittering river
that sprang from darkness and vanished into darkness.

There wasn't a moment to lose,
no deferred questions, no belated revelations,
just those experienced in time.
Wisdom couldn't wait for gray hair.
It had to see clearly before it saw the light
and to hear every voice before it sounded.

Good and evil--
they knew little of them, but knew all:
when evil triumphs, good goes into hiding;
when good is manifest, then evil lies low.
Neither can be conquered
or cast off beyond return.
Hence, if joy, then with a touch of fear;
if despair, then not without some quiet hope.
Life, however long, will always be short.
Too short for anything to be added.

Hitler's First Photograph

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers' little boy!
Will he grow up to be an L.L.D.?
Or a tenor in Vienna's Opera House?
Whose teensy hand is this, whose little ear and eye and nose?
Whose tummy full of milk, we just don't know:
printer's, doctor's, merchant's, priest's?
Where will those tootsy-wootsies finally wander?
To a garden, to a school, to an office, to a bride?
Maybe to the Bürgermeister's daughter?

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honey bun.
While he was being born, a year ago,
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky:
spring sun, geraniums in windows,
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper.
Then just before the labor his mother's fateful dream.
A dove seen in a dream means joyful news--
if it is caught, a long-awaited guest will come.
Knock Knock, who's there, it's Adolf's heartchen knocking.

A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib,
our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well,
looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket,
like the tots in every other family album.
Sh-h-h, let's not start crying, sugar.
The camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunen.
And Braunen is a small but worthy town--
honest businesses, obliging neighbors,
smell of yeast dough, of gray soap.
No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.
A history teacher loosens his collar
and yawns over homework.

The Century's Decline

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
It will never prove it now,
now that its years are numbered,
its gait is shaky,
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened
that weren't supposed to happen,
and what was supposed to come about
has not.

Happiness and spring, among other things,
were supposed to be getting closer.

Fear was expected to leave the mountains and the valleys.
Truth was supposed to hit home
before a lie.

A couple of problems weren't going
to come up anymore:
hunger, for example,
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect
for helpless people's helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
is now faced
with a hopeless task.

Stupidity isn't funny.
Wisdom isn't gay.
Hope
isn't that young girl anymore,
et cetera, alas.

God was finally going to believe
in a man both good and strong,
but good and strong
are still two different men.

"How should we live?" someone asked me in a letter.
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naïve ones.

Writing a Résumé

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

What needs to be done?

Fill out the application
and enclose the résumé.

Regardless of the length of life,
a résumé is best kept short.

Concise, well-chosen facts are de rigueur.
Landscapes are replaced by addresses,
shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.

Of all your loves, mention only the marriage;
of all your children, only those who were born.

Who knows you matters more than whom you know.
Trips only if taken abroad.
Memberships in what but without why.
Honors, but not how they were earned.

Write as if you'd never talked to yourself
and always kept yourself at arm's length.

Pass over in silence your dogs, cats, birds,
dusty keepsakes, friends, and dreams.

Price, not worth,
and title, not what's inside.
His shoe size, not where he's off to,
that one you pass off as yourself.
In addition, a photograph with one ear showing.
What matters is its shape, not what it hears.
What is there to hear, anyway?
The clatter of paper shredders.

A Tale Begun

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

The world is never ready
for the birth of a child.

Our ships are not yet back from Winnland.
We still have to get over the S. Gothard pass.
We've got to outwit the watchmen on the desert of Thor,

fight our way through the sewers to Warsaw's center,
gain access to King Harald the Butterpat,
and wait until the downfall of Minister Fouché.
Only in Acapulco
can we begin anew.

We've run out of bandages,
matches, hydraulic presses, arguments, and water.
We haven't got the trucks, we haven't got the Minghs' support.
This skinny horse won't be enough to bribe the sheriff.
No news so far about the Tartars' captives.
We'll need a warmer cave for winter
and someone who can speak Harari.

We don't know whom to trust in Nineveh,
what conditions the Prince-Cardinal will decree,
which names Beria has still got inside his files.
They say Karol the Hammer strikes tomorrow at dawn.

In this situation, let's appease Cheops,
report ourselves of our own free will,
change faiths,
pretend to be friends with the Doge,
and say that we've got nothing to do with the Kwabe tribe.

Time to light the fires.
Let's send a cable to grandma in Zabierzów.
Let's untie the knots in the yurt's leather straps.

May delivery be easy,
may our child grow and be well.
Let him be happy from time to time
and leap over abysses.
Let his heart have strength to endure
and his mind be awake and reach far.

But not so far
that it sees into the future.
Spare him
that one gift,
O heavenly powers.

The End and the Beginning
by Wisława Szymborska
trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

After every war
someone has to tidy up.
Things won't pick
themselves up, after all.

Someone has to shove
the rubble to the roadsides
so the cars loaded with corpses
can get by.

Someone has to trudge
through sludge and ashes,
through the sofa springs,
the shards of glass,
the bloody rags.

Someone has to lug the post
to prop the wall,
someone has to glaze the window,
set the door in its frame.

No sound bites, no photo opportunities,
and it takes years.
All the cameras have gone
to other wars.

The bridges need to be rebuilt,
the railroad stations, too.
Shirtsleeves will be rolled
to shreds.

Someone, broom in hand,
still remembers how it was.
someone else listens, nodding
his unshattered head.
But others are bound to be bustling nearby
who'll find all that
a little boring.

From time to time someone still must
dig up a rusted argument
from underneath a bush
and haul it off to the dump.

Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And at last nothing less than nothing.

Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.

Hatred

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

See how efficient it still is,
how it keeps itself in shape--
our century's hatred.
How easily it vaults the tallest obstacles.
How rapidly it pounces, tracks us down.

It's not like other feelings.
At once both older and younger.
It gives birth itself to the reasons
that give it life.
When it sleeps, it's never eternal rest.
And sleeplessness won't sap its strength; it feeds it.

One religion or another--
whatever gets it ready, in position.
One fatherland or another--
whatever helps it get a running start.
Justice also works well at the outset
until hate gets its own momentum going.
Hatred. Hatred.
Its face twisted in a grimace
of erotic ecstasy.

Oh these other feelings,
listless weaklings.

Since when does brotherhood

draw crowds?
Has compassion
ever finished first?
Does doubt ever really rouse the rabble?
Only hatred has just what it takes.

Gifted, diligent, hard-working.
Need we mention all the songs it has composed?
All the pages it has added to our history books?
All the human carpets it has spread
over countless city squares and football fields?

Let's face it:
it knows how to make beauty.
the splendid fire-glow in midnight skies.
Magnificent bursting bombs in rosy dawns.
You can't deny the inspiring pathos of ruins
and a certain bawdy humor to be found
in the sturdy column jutting from their midst.

Hatred is a master of contrast--
between explosions and dead quiet,
red blood and white snow.
Above all, it never tires
of its leitmotif--the impeccable executioner
towering over its soiled victim.

It's always ready for new challenges.
If it has to wait awhile, it will.
They say it's blind. Blind?
It has a sniper's keen sight
and gazes unflinchingly at the future
as only it can.

Reality Demands

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on.
It continues at Cannae and Borodino,
at Kosovo Polje and Guernica.

There's a gas station
on a little square in Jericho,
and wet paint
on park benches in Bila Hora.
Letters fly back and forth
between Pearl Harbor and Hastings,
a moving van passes
beneath the eye of the lion at Cheronea,
and the blooming orchards near Verdun
cannot escape
the approaching atmospheric front.

There is so much Everything
that nothing is hidden quite nicely.
Music pours
from the yachts moored at Actium
and couples dance on their sunlit decks.

So much is always going on,
that it must be going on all over.

Where not a stone still stands
you see the Ice Cream Man
besieged by children.
Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
producing many products
for everyday use.

This terrifying world is not devoid of charms,
of the mornings
that make making up worthwhile.
the grass is green
on Maciejowice's fields,
and it is studded with dew,
as is normal with grass.

Perhaps all fields are battlefields,
all grounds are battlegrounds,
those we remember
and those that are forgotten:
the birch, cedar, and fir forests, the white snow,
the yellow sands, gray gravel, the iridescent swamps,
the canyons of black defeat,
where, in times of crisis,
you can cower under a bush.

What moral flows from this? Probably none.
Only the blood flows, drying quickly,
and, as always, a few rivers, a few clouds.

On tragic mountain passes
the wind rips hats from unwitting heads
and we can't help
laughing at that.

Parting with a View

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

I don't reproach the spring
for starting up again.
I can't blame it
for doing what it must
year after year.

I know that my grief
will not stop the green.
The grass blade may bend
but only in the wind.

It doesn't pain me to see
that clumps of alders above the water
have something to rustle with again.

I take note of the fact
that the shore of a certain lake
is still--as if you were living--
as lovely as before.

I don't resent
the view for its vista
of a sun-dazzled bay.

I am even able to imagine
some non-us
sitting at this minute
on a fallen birch trunk.

I respect their right

to whisper, laugh,
and lapse into happy silence.

I can even allow
that they are bound by love
and that he holds her
with a living arm.

something freshly birdish
starts rustling in the reeds.
I sincerely want them
to hear it.

I don't require changes
from the surf,
now diligent, now sluggish,
obeying not me.

I expect nothing
from the depths near the woods,
first emerald,
then sapphire,
then black.

There's one thing I won't agree to:
my own return.
The privilege of presence--
I give it up.

I survived you by enough,
and only by enough,
to contemplate from afar.

Love at First Sight

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

They're both convinced
that a sudden passion joined them.
Such certainty is beautiful,
but uncertainty is more beautiful still.

Since they'd never met before, they're sure
that there'd been nothing between them.

But what's the word from the streets, staircases, hallways--
perhaps they've passed by each other a million times?

I want to ask them
if they don't remember--
a moment face to face
in some revolving door?
perhaps a "sorry" muttered in a crowd?
a curt "wrong number" caught in the receiver?
but I know the answer.
No, they don't remember.

They'd be amazed to hear
that Chance has been toying with them
now for years.

Not quite ready yet
to become their Destiny,
it pushed them close, drove them apart,
it barred their path,
stifling a laugh,
and then leaped aside.

There were signs and signals,
even if they couldn't read them yet.
Perhaps three years ago
or just last Tuesday
a certain leaf fluttered
from one shoulder to another?
Something was dropped and then picked up.
Who knows, maybe the ball that vanished
into childhood's thicket?

There were doorknobs and doorbells
where one touch had covered another
beforehand.
Suitcases checked and standing side by side.
One night, perhaps, the same dream,
grown hazy by morning.

Every beginning
is only a sequel, after all,
and the book of events
is always open halfway through.

Maybe All This

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

Maybe all this
is happening in some lab?
Under one lamp by day
and billions by night?

Maybe we're experimental generations?
Poured from one vial to the next,
shaken in test tubes,
not scrutinized by eyes alone,
each of us separately
plucked up by tweezers in the end?

Or maybe it's more like this:
No interference?
The changes occur on their own
according to plan?
The graph's needle slowly etches
its predictable zigzags?

Maybe thus far we aren't of much interest?
The control monitors aren't usually plugged in?
Only for wars, preferably large ones,
for the odd ascent above our clump of Earth,
for major migrations from point A to B?

maybe just the opposite:
They've got a taste for trivia up there?
Look! on the big screen a little girl
is sewing a button on her sleeve.
The radar shrieks,
the staff comes at a run.
What a darling little being
with its tiny heart beating inside it!
How sweet, its solemn
threading of the needle!
Someone cries enraptured:
Get the Boss,
tell him he's got to see this for himself!

Slapstick

by Wisława Szymborska

trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

[from *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, Wisława Szymborska, trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995.]

If there are angels,
I doubt they read
our novels
concerning thwarted hopes.

I'm afraid, alas,
they never touch the poems
that bear our grudges against the world.

The rantings and railings
of our plays
must drive them, I suspect,
to distraction.

Off-duty, between angelic--
i.e., inhuman--occupations,
they watch instead
our slapstick
from the age of silent film.

To our dirge wailers,
garment renders,
and teeth gnashers,
they prefer, I suppose,
that poor devil
who grabs the drowning man by his toupee
or, starving, devours his own shoelaces
with gusto.

From the waist up, starch and aspirations;
below, a startled mouse
runs down his trousers.
I'm sure
that's what they call real entertainment.

A crazy chase in circles
ends up pursuing the pursuer.
The light at the end of the tunnel
turns out to be a tiger's eye.
A hundred disasters
mean a hundred comic somersaults
turned over a hundred abysses.

If there are angels,
they must, I hope,
find this convincing,
this merriment dangling from terror,
not even crying Save me Save me
since all of this takes place in silence.

I can even imagine
that they clap their wings
and tears run from their eyes
from laughter, if nothing else.

Every Case

by Wisława Szymborska

(born 1923)

[from *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. by Czeslaw Milosz, 3rd Edition, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.]

It could have happened.
It must have happened.
It happened earlier. Later.
Closer by. Further away.
It happened not to you.

You survived because you were the first.
You survived because you were the last.
Because you were alone. Because you were with others.
Because to the left. Because to the right.
Because it rained. Because there was shade.
Because the day was sunny.

Fortunately a forest was there.
Fortunately no trees were there.
Fortunately a rail, a hook, a bar, a brake,
an embrasure, a curve, a millimeter, a second.
Fortunately a razor was floating on water.

As a consequence, because, and yet, in spite.
What it would have been if a hand, a leg,
within an ace of, by a hair's breadth
saved from a combination of circumstances.

So you are here? Straight from an abrogated moment?
The net had just one mesh and you went through that mesh?
I am all surprise and all silence.

Listen,
how quickly your heart beats to me.

The Museum
Wis awa Szymborska
(born 1923)
trans. Magnus F. Krynski
[from *The Poetry of Survival: Post War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort, pub. Penguin Books, NY, 1993.]

There have been plates but no appetite
Wedding rings but no love returned
for at least three hundred years.

There is a fan--where are the rosy cheeks?
There are swords--where is the anger?
Nor does the lute twang at dusk.

For want of eternity ten thousand
old things have been assembled.
A mossy guard is having sweet dreams
his moustaches draped over a showcase.

Metals, earthenware, a bird's feather
quietly triumph in time.
Just the giggle of a sweet thing's pin from ancient Egypt.

The crown has outlasted the head.
The hand has lost out to the glove.
The right shoe has won out over the foot.

As for me, I'm alive, please believe me.
The race with my dress is still on.
You can't imagine my rival's will to win!
And how much it would like to outlast me!

Clothes
by Wisława Szymborska
[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

You take off, we take off, they take off
coats, jackets, blouses, double-breasted suits
made of wood, cotton, cotton-polyester,
skirts, shirts, underwear, slacks, slips, socks,
putting, hanging, tossing them across

the backs of chairs, the wings of metal screens;
for now, the doctor says, it's not too bad,
you may get dressed, get rested up, get out of town,
take one in case, at bedtime, after lunch,
show up in a couple months, next spring, next year;
you see, and you thought, and we were afraid that,
and he imagined, and you all believed;
it's time to tie, to fasten with shaking hands
shoelaces, buckles, Velcro, Zippers, snaps,
belts, buttons, cufflinks, collars, neckties, clasps
and to pull out of handbags, pockets, sleeves
a crumpled, dotted, flowered, chequered scarf
whose usefulness has been suddenly prolonged.

On Death, without Exaggeration

by Wisława Szymborska

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

It can't take a joke,
find a star, make a bridge,
it knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming,
building ships or baking cakes.

In our planning for tomorrow
it has the final word
which is always beside the point.

It can't even get the things done
that are part of its trade:
dig a grave,
make a coffin,
clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,
it does the job awkwardly,
without system or skill.
As though each of us were its first kill.

Oh, it has its triumphs,
but look at its countless defeats,
missed blows
and repeat attempts!

Sometimes it isn't strong enough
to swat a fly from the air.

Many's the caterpillar
that has out-crawled it.

All those bulbs, pods,
tentacles, fins, tracheae,
nuptial plumage and winter fur
\show that it's fallen behind
with its half-hearted work.

In Broad Daylight

by Wisława Szymborska

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

He would
vacation in a mountain boardinghouse, he would
come down for lunch, from his
table by the window he would
scan the four spruces, branch to branch,
without shaking off the freshly fallen snow.

Goateed, balding,
gray-haired, in glasses,
with coarsened, weary features,
with a wart on his cheek and a furrowed forehead,
as if clay had covered up the angelic marble--he wouldn't
know himself when it all happened.
The price, after all, for not having died already
goes up not in leaps but step-by-step, and he would
pay that price, too.
About his ear, just grazed by the bullet
when he ducked at the last minute, he would
say: "I was damn lucky."

While waiting to be served his noodle soup, he would
read a paper with the current date,
giant headlines, tiny print of ads,
or drum his fingers on the white tablecloth, and his hands would
have been used a long time now,
with their chapped skin and swollen veins.

Sometimes someone would
yell from the doorway: "Mr. Baczynski, phone call for you"--
and there'd be nothing strange about that
being him, about him standing up, straightening his sweater

Tortures

by Wisława Szymborska

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

Nothing has changed.
The body is a reservoir of pain,
it has to eat and breathe the air, and sleep,
it's got thin skin and the blood is just beneath it,
it's got a good supply of teeth and fingernails,
it's bones can be broken, its joints can be stretched.
In tortures, all of this is considered.

Nothing has changed.
The body still trembles as it trembled
before Rome was founded and after
in the twentieth century before and after
Christ;
tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk
and whatever goes on sounds as if it's just a room away.

Nothing has changed.
except there are more people,
and new offences have sprung up beside the old ones,
real, make-believe, short-lived, and nonexistent,
but the cry with which the body answers for them
was, is, and will be a cry of innocence
in keeping with the age-old scale and pitch.

Nothing has changed.
Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, dances.
The gesture of the hands shielding the head
has nonetheless remained the same.
The body writhes, jerks, and tugs,
falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees,
bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.

Nothing has changed.
Except the run of rivers,
the shapes of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.
The little soul roams among those landscapes,
disappears, returns, draws near, moves away,
evasive and a stranger to itself,
now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,
whereas the body is and is and is
and has nowhere to go.

Possibilities

by Wisława Szymborska

[from *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun. Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule*, ed. & trans. by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1991.]

I prefer movies.
I prefer cats.
I prefer the oaks along the Warta.
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevski.
I prefer myself liking people
to myself loving mankind.
I prefer keeping a needle and thread on hand, just in case.
I prefer the color green.
I prefer not to maintain
that reason is to blame for everything.
I prefer exceptions.
I prefer to leave early.
I prefer talking to doctors about something else.
I prefer the old fine-lined illustrations.
I prefer the absurdity of writing poems
to the absurdity of not writing poems.
I prefer, where love's concerned, nonspecific anniversaries
that can be celebrated every day.
I prefer moralists
who promise me nothing.
I prefer cunning kindness to the over-trustful kind.
I prefer the earth in civvies.
I prefer conquered to conquering countries.
I prefer having some reservations.
I prefer the hell of chaos to the hell of order.
I prefer Grimm's fairy tales to the newspapers' front pages.
I prefer leaves without flowers to flowers without leaves.
I prefer dogs with uncropped tails.
I prefer light eyes, since mine are dark.
I prefer desk drawers.
I prefer many things that I haven't mentioned here
to many things I've also left unsaid.
I prefer zeroes on the loose
to those lined up behind a cipher.
I prefer the time of insects to the time of stars.
I prefer to knock on wood.
I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.
I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
that existence has its own reason for being.